OceanofPDF.com

Becoming His Mistress

OceanofPDF.com

A. E. Murphy

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41

Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Epilogue
Snapback to the wedding…
Have you read…?

Acknowledgments
About the Author
Also By The Author

OceanofPDF.com

PamPammy Shepherd, we are forever bonded over alcoholic slushies, Aladdin, and terrible duets in bathrooms.

OceanofPDF.com

His eyes and all their imperfections.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Conti," I say, holding out my hand, turning it slightly upwards so he can see my perfectly manicured nails. I do them myself, a little hobby of mine. I think pretty, clean nails say a lot about a person, even men. Hygiene is so important. "I'm Rose Sinclair."

His large hand engulfs mine, making me feel so very breakable. His grip is as firm and warm as his eyes.

Mr. Ezra Conti, an American-Italian megalomaniac lives to make other people feel so very breakable. I have spent the past three weeks of my life memorizing his life and his role at WhyTech. I know more details about his life, his business, and his family, than I know about myself.

Though that's likely because he has more details in his life, family, and business.

He is the unattainable Mr. C.

From what I've read, women throw themselves at him despite his marital status. Once the most eligible bachelor in Rome, now a married man, smitten with his wife of twelve years, living in LA and not looking to slow down with his business responsibilities anytime soon.

To say he has travelled much in his life would be an understatement.

One of the main reasons I want to be a part of his personal team. *The travel.*

His handsome, gray eyes, heavy-lidded and narrowed in a way that is so sharp and assessing, look me up and down. It's a general look, not a seedy lingering look and I'm glad of that. Though I am most unassuming, but that is for a reason.

I'm not here to look *hot.* Not that I could. I'm not even sure I know how. I'm here to work. Well… interview. But I know the job is mine so that's a moot point. This job was meant for me. There isn't a single thing on the list of duties that I cannot do with quickness and

efficiency.

"It's nice to meet you, Ms. Sinclair, but I'm afraid to inform you that I already filled the position."

I blink slowly, still holding his hand with a tight squeeze. "I'm afraid to inform you that you made the wrong decision." Releasing his hand, I push my glasses up my nose, aware of the fact they make my eyes look almost half the size they are, but I've had them long enough to not care what people think. I'm legally blind without them.

He chuckles and continues smiling as he speaks, "Is that so?"

His voice is deep and gruff, but also smooth. It's exactly as it was on the phone when I first called about the position almost a month ago.

He pushes his hair back, it's neat, dark, trimmed, slightly longer than his last most recent picture. He is cleanly shaven, so smooth and kempt and he has clean fingernails. I can see why women throw themselves at him. The way he looks, plus his voice, his clearly good hygiene, and his incredible laugh. It's a concoction for heartbreak.

Luckily for me, he's not my type, so I won't spend my days working for a man that I'm pining over, knowing he can never be mine.

"There is nobody better for this job than me," I state simply but I know it's true. I'm only twenty-three but I have been working for a position like this since I was fifteen years old. "*Nobody*."

"Is that so?" he repeats, and I can tell he thinks I'm cute in the way one finds a puppy cute. "The man I employed has fifteen years' worth of experience already. You have none. You have no connections, no ties in the business world, wouldn't you be better suited doing a work placement in a less demanding position?" He waves his large hand in the air, still smiling kindly.

"That may be so, but I'm friendly and *very persuasive*, I don't find it hard to make new friends. I'm never late. Never sick. I have OCD, I won't lie, but I've taught myself to use it in the best kind of ways. I am excellent with numbers——"

"OCD? What kind of OCD?" he asks, and they usually find that interesting. There are so many misconceptions about OCD that I worry it might put them off, but the way my brain handles it only makes my job easier. So it's always worth mentioning.

"If you hire me, you'll see what I'm talking about." I smile up at him. Up because he's about a foot taller than me.

"Give me a bit of an insight."

"Well, I'm organized, I repeat, I can't leave a task unfinished and I can't leave it less than adequate. This doesn't mean I take more time though; I've trained myself to be super-efficient with it." I grin at him, hoping it looks confident. "I can multitask. And… I also have a

photographic memory."

He raises his brows. "You do?"

"Yes. I do. Genuinely. Which means you'll always have somebody to prompt you with your sales pitches and such. I know you do a lot of those, what with controlling the sales sector." I shift to my other foot and raise a hand. "You can test me if you like?"

"With what?"

"Any kind of document. Show me, I look, I remember it word for word." I am so proud of this fact. I'm one of very few people with this talent. "I find it hard to forget things."

He laughs at that; he has such a nice laugh. "I bet you hold a mean grudge."

"I don't have time for grudges, Mr. Conti," I jest, "I work too hard."

Still smiling, he picks up a sheet of paper from the bottom of a stack off his desk. "Just in case you cheated and read it already."

I laugh nervously and look at the paper he shows me. It's an article on his company, talking about their excellent technological advances with solar energy. I look at it, scan it, look up at him and smile.

"Done?" he asks, brows still raised.

I nod and turn around.

"What are you doing?"

"So, you know I'm not cheating, I'm going to read it back to you word for word."

"This should be interesting."

Clearing my throat, I begin, "Two thousand and nineteen has breached milestone upon milestone when it comes to new advances in solar-powered technology. Here at WhyTech…"

I read from brain, and don't stop until I hear him slow clap.

"That's incredible," he tells me, impressed. "But memorizing documents isn't enough to secure you a position as my PA. I try to be fair especially with newcomers and young people fresh out of college, but I need the experience and networking right now."

I'm not one to swear often but I really want to curse right now.

This is pants.

I need to convince him.

Think, Rose, Think.

"I understand. I do. But… give me two weeks. Just two," I beg, trying to look as cute and endearing as possible. "And if my excellent skills in your field, your company, and your life don't impress you, then I'll walk away without an issue. You don't even have to pay me. Look, you read my resume meaning something about it must have enticed you to invite me for an interview… I know experience is essential, but I promise you will not even notice that I've never

worked for a man like you before." When he hesitates I put on my brightest smile. "Did I mention I was a foster kid? Raised in poverty, risen from the ashes of my deadbeat parents, paid my own way through university…"

"Okay, okay," he replies, laughing as he raises his hand. "I'll give you one week to impress me and show me that you're a better choice than Fisk."

"Ah," I click my fingers. "Fisk means fish, Rose is a beautiful flower… already I'm winning."

He chuckles and looks me up and down, again, not seedy, he's just assessing me and my body language. "You can start tomorrow, be back here at seven, have my coffee ready, notes are in my prior PA's desk."

"I'll do you one better," I reply, pushing my glasses up my nose again. "I'll start right now."

"Well," he comments, shaking his head with amusement. "You were right about one thing."

"What's that?"

"You are *very* persuasive."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter One

He gave me a chance that no one else did.

Six Months and Two days Later

"Morning, Mrs. Conti," I call, maneuvering the door and kicking it closed behind me.

Their home is grand, an open lobby of sorts with one of those wide, curved staircases that leads to an open space above. Their walls are cream and gold with tasteful art and ornaments in all the right places.

"You are a lifesaver," she replies loudly, greeting me, covered in flour and jam. She doesn't look dressed for cooking of any kind and this is totally out of character for her. I've never seen her with a hair out of place.

I press my lips together, so I don't laugh. "Are you baking, Mrs. Conti?"

"Absolutely not, Maria is but she decided to overfill the mixer, my kitchen is a sight. I haven't had time to shower yet." She takes the bag from my arms as I juggle it with Mr. Conti's files that he requested.

I try not to laugh. Maria, their ten-year-old daughter, is wild to say the least, but not in a naughty way. She just doesn't have any boundaries. She'll go where she wants and do what she wants as she wants it.

"It was no problem, Mrs. Conti," I respond. "I'll just put these in Mr. Conti's office."

"Sure, go on up." She turns away from me, reminding me of the first day I met her.

I had seen her emails to her husband about hiring a whore to tend his office and shadow him, she was terrified I'd sleep with him, but then she saw me, took one look at me, turned, and walked away. He never got an email like that again.

It's not that I'm ugly or anything, I just purposely don't make myself look *amazing* so that I can get on with my job without the

appraising eyes of others. I respect women who can look sexy and work but I don't have the balls to put up with judgmental people. I just want to keep myself to myself and do what I do best. Be invisible and work hard.

Besides, I'd never sleep with Mr. C. Sure, he is gorgeous, but he's clearly married, he's faithful to his wife, and lastly, I don't need that kind of situation messing up my schedule. Everything in my life has a place and Mr. C has his place with his wife and child and as my boss.

I'm happy doing what I do. I get to travel. I get my own vehicle. I get excellent perks doing what I do. I would never fuck that up by fucking my boss.

Also… he's like so old.

He's thirty-seven. That's a whopping thirteen years and five months older than me. Gross.

Still, I can't deny that I like staring at his back sometimes. He's got really nice shoulders.

Le sigh.

I head upstairs, clutching the binders and files tight to my chest. My phone starts ringing in my pocket and with a bit of shuffling I manage to answer it and squeeze it between my shoulder and ear.

"Rose Sinclair, how may I help you?"

"Dude, please tell me you're not gonna bail on Saturday. You haven't been answering my messages."

I laugh, happy to hear my closest friend and anxious, also OCD-crazed woman called Laurie. We met during group therapy sessions as teens to help us deal with our abandonment issues and anxieties. She's quirkier than I am in all the best ways. She has mild Tourette's too and her favorite thing to say around me is, "Mrs. Cuntyflaps." Referring to my boss' wife.

It's not that we don't like Mrs. Conti, she's a… erm… *pleasant* enough woman. She's just a bit cold and impersonal with her staff. She expects perfection and the way she speaks to us when she doesn't get it is shocking to say the least. She uses the words idiot and moron a lot.

Mr. C dotes on her though. Forever sending her gifts and touching her when they're around. It's sweet. She's entirely different with him than she is with her staff, from what I've seen in the open anyway.

"My hands are full. I'll be there, I promise. Just no blind dates, I will kill you." I've never been into dating; guys just mess up my schedule and take up all of my free time.

"I swear it. This Saturday is all about you and me, baby. FUCK A LIGHTSWITCH."

I snicker at her twitch.

"THE LAMPSHADE IS ALWAYS WATCHING YOU!"

“Have you been shopping for home stuff?”

“Yeah, I forgot my meds this morning and didn’t have time to do my exercises. I’m a bit jerky. BEEF JERKY UP YOUR BUM!”

I laugh so hard I almost drop the things I’m holding. “Gotta go. Love you, babe.”

“Love you more,” she replies just as I use my foot to press down the handle to Mr. C’s office. The door clicks open.

I announce, “It’s only me.”

“There you are, right on time as always,” Mr. C declares, sounding his normal disinterested self. He has yet to get mad at me personally to be honest which is a relief. I’ve seen him mad at others and it wasn’t fun. He’s super intimidating.

He rounds his desk to help me with my load, smoothing his thick, shiny, dark brown hair back with a large hand. A smile is fixed on his face, showing white teeth behind pink lips and cleanly shaven cheeks.

He smells citrussy. He’s been using the aftershave I helped his daughter pick for his birthday back in March. It’s so good.

“Everything on track?”

“Ahead of schedule as always, Mr. C,” I reply happily. “Is there anything else I can help with?”

He wanted me to call him Ezra, but I just can’t, especially since his wife wants me to refer to her as Mrs. Conti at all times. It would have been weird being so personal with him and not with her. I don’t mind. But still, we came to an agreement that I’d call him Mr. C. A happy medium for both of us.

“Nothing that comes to mind. I appreciate you bringing these out here,” he comments, forever gracious. He’s the opposite of his wife, he treats his staff with respect and kindness… when we’re doing our jobs right anyway. Though he still doesn’t get familiar. In the six months we’ve worked and travelled together, we’ve eaten in the same space only a handful of times and even then he was looking at his phone or laptop. I can’t remember us ever having much of a conversation. “How long have we been working together now?”

“Six months and two days.”

“Have you ever taken a day off?”

See? He doesn’t pay attention to me beyond the work I’m doing. I shake my head. “Not a personal day off, no. But the mandatory days off, yes.”

He sits behind his desk and eyes me inquisitively. “You should book your annual leave.”

“I don’t have anything planned,” I reply simply.

“Then plan something and get back to me with the dates.”

I hesitate. “But then you’ll have to hire somebody to cover me and they’ll mess up my desk and my calendar and…”

He gives me a look that signals that it's time for me to go and says, "I'm extremely busy right now, Rose."

"Right." I've been dismissed. That's annoying.

I head downstairs, arms empty, feeling slightly aggravated which must mean I'm due for a visit from Aunt Flo because I never get aggravated.

I just don't like the idea of somebody else screwing up my job and I know they will.

"ROSE!" Maria cries when I reach the front door, ready to slip out silently. The kid has bat ears or something. "Rose! Wait!"

I turn to look at her and she is covered in flour, oil, colorful sprinkles… you name it.

"Hey, squirt," I say, patting the only clean part of her head. "You look like you're having fun."

"You can't go yet. I did something." She goes to grab my wrist with her greasy little fingers but thinks better of it. The last time she did that I had to wash my hands thirty-six times. Because six times six. My hands were sore afterwards. It's not that I'm opposed to a bit of dirt, but I don't like sticky things or… okay I'm totally opposed to visible dirt, especially sticky things or oily things, but I have it under control now. "Come on."

I follow her towards the kitchen, already having a panic attack at what I might find.

It's worse than a mess… there's just stuff *everywhere*. And this is a really big kitchen.

"Oh my God," I whisper, feeling my heartbeat rise as I step over a pile of flour and almost slip in a dollop of jelly. I catch myself on the worktop, putting my hand in something gloopy.

"Oh dear, are you okay?" Maria asks as I calm my breathing. "I'm sorry, I didn't think it was this bad. Daddy is going to kill me. Are you going to cry?"

"Nope," I lie. I actually might. "What is it you wanted to show me?"

She rushes to the counter where the cleaner is ready and waiting with a bucket full of supplies. She looks as close to tears as I am.

I give her a toothy smile that probably looks more like a grimace and return my gaze to the child who is approaching me with a cake in her hands. It's big, and kind of round, covered in rainbow frosting, edible glitter, and sprinkles. And in the center is my name with one candle sticking out of the E.

"I made you a birthday cake," she announces, looking so proud of herself. The dimple in her chin is so deep with her beaming smile. "Margot helped."

Margot is the maid, we don't really speak because we never see

each other, so the fact she's stopped work to help this ten-year-old make me something is so sweet.

"Nobody has ever made me a cake before," I breathe, choking back tears.

I was raised in foster home after foster home and I got birthday cakes of course but never one that was homemade.

My tears fall as I take the cake from the little brown-haired angel and blow out the one candle.

"Did you make a wish?" she asks, and I nod, still crying. "What did you wish for?"

"That one day I'll have a little girl who is just like you," I reply, crouching down so I can hug her. She squeezes me around my neck, almost making us both fall. "Thank you so much, Maria. This is the best gift I have ever received in my entire life."

Standing, I pay no attention to the fact I'm now covered in flour and whatever else. I'm too emotional. I take a knife and cut into the cake, sharing a slice with Margot and Maria. It's actually delicious. It's moist and buttery and sweet. I could eat it all in one go but that would be greedy.

"Why don't you take a piece to your dad and then come help us clean up?" I suggest and her big gray eyes light up. I put her a piece on a plate and off she goes, watching it carefully with each step. Then I look at Margot. "How did this even happen?"

When she whimpers in response, I grab a cloth from the side of the sink.

"Don't worry, we got this."

We start with the counters, washing them down and piling the dishes into the dishwasher. We dump the bigger ones in the sink and leave those for later.

"How many cakes did she make?"

Margot laughs. She doesn't talk much. I actually wonder if she can talk at all or if she's just shy.

"Why didn't you tell me it's your birthday?" Mr. C's voice booms as he enters the kitchen through the same door as me. He stops in his tracks to take in the scene, much like I did. "Jesus fuck… MARIA!"

"Don't," I plead with him, wiping my hands on my dirty trousers. He looks me up and down, aghast. "She didn't mean to make a mess."

"I'm going to clean it up, Daddy," Maria says, rolling her eyes at him as though he's overreacting. He's not. "Margot and Rose are helping me."

"Don't ever do anything in this kitchen again without your mother or I," he says firmly, and the little girl nods her head, unfazed by his anger.

"Me," I put in softly. "Your mother or me."

He blinks at me, his gray eyes like storm clouds blocking the sun. “Did you just correct me?”

“I didn’t want Maria to pick up the wrong way of saying it,” I respond, cringing. “Also… nervous tic.”

He mutters a curse in Italian likely aimed at me and snatches the sponge from my hand. I’m surprised when he gets stuck in, helping to clean the kitchen alongside us.

“You’re not doing anything,” he tells me just as firmly as he told his daughter. “This isn’t part of your job and it’s your birthday. Don’t you have any plans? Nothing with family or friends?”

I shake my head. “No family, remember? I’m going out with my friend on Saturday night though, so I’m not a total lost cause.”

Sighing, he takes my bicep in his hand which is damp from the sponge and leads me out of the kitchen.

“Go home, do something… other than work.”

I’m pushed through the doorway as I call over my shoulder, “Best cake ever, Maria.”

“Woohoo!” she cheers from somewhere behind me.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Two

How much he loves his daughter.

I know I shouldn't have, but I showered twice. I didn't have a choice. My brain made me. It was the only way to rid myself of the flour and jelly that wasn't there.

My hair smells and feels awesome though. It's a warm, almost natural dark brown, I obviously use red toners and such to keep it vibrant.

I braid it twice too and curl up in my pajamas on the sofa. I'm watching Bumblebee. I love action films, which is funny because they're so messy on screen. Debris flying everywhere and stuff.

I'm at the part where she's just discovered him when the buzzer sounds, signaling that there's somebody at the entranceway to my apartment building wanting to see me.

I press the button and hold it down, "Hello?"

"It's MEEEE!" Maria cries. "And my dad!"

"Can you stop shouting?" Mr. C. asks his daughter as I mouth the panicked words, "OH MY GOD!"

"Did I forget something? Do you need me to babysit?"

"Nope, we're here to celebrate your birthday," Maria replies. "Can we come in?"

My mouth flaps open and closed as I look around my apartment. It's clean. It's always clean. But something might not be.

"Sure," I reply and press the other button that opens the entrance door. "I'm the only door on this floor, just on your left by the stairs.

I hear it buzz-beep (that's a thing) and rush around to ensure that everything is in its place.

I don't often get visitors; I can't relax with visitors and this is my boss… I'll never be able to relax around him. I didn't hear Mrs. Conti. I really hope she's not here.

I pace twelve times, because six add six, and then open the door when I hear Maria's loud chatter getting closer and closer.

"I'm in my pajamas," I say the second it opens. My pajamas are baggy and plaid that I love so hard.

“Awesome!” Maria’s excitement soon fades when she sees what I’m wearing. “They’re boys’ jammies.”

Mr. C. who looks as uncomfortable as I feel stands in my doorway that I’m still blocking. His lips twitch when he checks out my sleeping outfit of choice. “A boyfriend’s?”

Shaking my head, I reply, “No. I got them from the men’s section in a sale at Macy’s. They’re so soft though. How could I not?”

Then I hold out my arm to him and he actually pats it with an awkwardly muttered, “Nice.”

What is wrong with me?

I push on the bridge of my glasses and finally stand to the side. “Come in, please. Make yourselves at home.”

“Your apartment is so small,” Maria says with childlike innocence.

“I like it small. There’s just me.”

She kicks off her shoes and jumps on my sofa. “We want to take you out to dinner, but you have to get dressed first.”

I look at Mr. C for confirmation but he’s eyeing my certificates on the wall. Dark frames hold my degree and other conquered projects.

“Unless you made plans?” he asks, still eyeing my belongings with a disinterested look on his face.

“I didn’t but——”

“Then get dressed, we’ll wait,” he orders, using the same tone he uses at work. Firm and to the point.

After six months I should be used to him, but he still makes me nervous.

“Well… actually…” I chew on my lip. “I already ordered Chinese food. They do the best duck ever.”

He clicks his tongue against his palate. “Too late to cancel?”

“Definitely, but I ordered loads. Enough for all of us, if you want to stay and join me?”

He looks around my apartment once more. I wish I knew what he was thinking. Then he kicks off his shoes, takes off his jacket, sits on my sofa and asks, “What are we watching?”

Is it bad that I was hoping he’d say no, thank you and leave?

This is weird.

“Bumblebee.”

“Haven’t seen this one yet,” he comments and restarts the movie.

“Wine, whiskey, or soda?” I ask, moving to my little kitchen space.

“Whiskey,” he replies.

“Me too,” Maria jokes.

I stick my tongue out at her and pour the drinks. Pouring myself two fingers of whiskey and mixing it with a dash of water. I add ice to his and give it to him neat. I get Maria a grape soda that I buy for when Laurie comes. She loves sugary drinks. They both do.

“Thank you, I’d have brought something with me had I known we’d be staying in.”

“That’s why phones were invented,” I remark playfully, sitting on my favorite recliner seat and bringing my feet up to my butt. I hold my glass and tap my fingernails against the side. I know it annoys him when I do that but my house, my rules.

He still gives me a look of irritancy though and I just smile and smile and smile.

Maria wanders around my first-floor apartment for a while, looking at trinkets but not touching. She’s good like that. Well, I say apartment but really, it’s a house that has been separated into two. I share an entrance door with my neighbor but the second apartment is above mine, so I rarely see her. I’m on the first floor.

I sip my whiskey and water in an awkward silence. Mr. C. sips his whiskey in his own awkward silence. The movie plays but nobody is really watching it.

“Why don’t we play a game?” I suggest, chewing on the corner of my mouth. “I have cards. We can play Go Fish?”

“YES!” Maria cheers.

“Why not?” Mr. C mutters, putting his phone away after checking it for the hundredth time.

I sit cross-legged on the sofa, moving to the space beside Mr. C because Maria took my space on the recliner. I don’t mind, she’s a guest and I’d look like a dick if I asked her to move.

After dealing out the deck we play two rounds before food is here. Mr. C retrieves it, muttering about me being indecent despite the fact my body is probably draped in more fabric than I have bedding in this house.

He pays for it too and refuses to take my money when I offer it. That’s sweet but he always does that when we eat together. Money isn’t an object for him.

I get the plates and spread them on the dining room table, pouring us both more whiskey as Mr. C serves it.

“You really did order a lot of food,” he comments quietly, his lips twitching with a smile.

“I usually save it and eat it for breakfast.”

“That’s gross.”

“Meh. Each to their own.”

“Did you know that cold rice houses more bacteria than almost every other food?” Maria asks excitedly and I make a mental note to check that fact out later.

“Kids just know things,” I say, sipping more of my whiskey.

This is so entirely awkward still, even after two boring rounds of Go Fish. Either Mr. C just has no personality when it comes to games,

or we have zero chemistry in any way. And I don't mean romantic chemistry, just chemistry in general. Like if I was sitting here with Laurie right now, we'd be laughing so hard we'd have tears and snot all over our faces.

A gross picture but such truth.

We eat in silence, listening to Maria yammer on about something to do with romance and the Mayans. I didn't know those two things were related but, apparently, they are. And aliens. Aliens are involved in some way too.

We finish our dinner and I start to clear the plates away. Mr. C helps, wiping down the table and taking the trash to the garbage shoot down the hall. I've almost finished when he returns and smiles at me. *Still awkward.*

Fuck, I wish this night would end.

Maria screeches with glee, holding up a microphone that connects to the TV. We both jumped at her sudden screech, my wet hand goes to my heart and Mr. C looks at it and rolls his eyes, smiling with amusement.

"OMG, you have Sing IT!" She actually said O.M.G. instead of oh my God like the rest of us losers.

"I do," I reply.

"You sing?" Mr. C asks, disbelief marring his handsome features. He really is very handsome to look at. Not that I'm being creepy or anything.

I compare it to going to a museum and looking at a piece of pretty art. It's great to look at occasionally, but I don't want it in my apartment within touching distance.

"I don't," I reply using the same tone as when I said I do, and he chuckles.

Ha. I made a funny.

I drain my whiskey because I just know she's going to make me sing with her. She sets both microphones up and starts flicking through songs.

I need more whiskey.

I pour myself three fingers' worth and smile when Mr. C's glass, hand, and arm appear over my shoulder. I pour him some too.

A Disney song starts… eff my life.

Approximately fifteen minutes and another whiskey later.

"A WHOLE NEW WORLD!" Maria sings at the top of her lungs.

"A new fantastic point is through!" I continue, slurring my words a little, swaying on the spot, ignoring Mr. C as he laughs and falls sideways onto my sofa.

"NO ONE CAN TELL ME NO!"

“Or where I’m going!”

“Those aren’t the words.” He’s laughing so hard now his eyes are squeezed shut.

“OR SAY I’M ONLY DREAMING!”

“Unbelievable sights…”

“You already sang that part!” He sits up and wipes his eyes on his sleeve, still laughing and choking on it. “You’re supposed to read the words on the screen.”

“I can’t see the words on the screen,” I yell at him, playfully angry. I push my glasses up my nose and collapse on the sofa beside him. The song hasn’t ended yet, so I shove the microphone into his chest, making him grunt. His chest is so firm.

I want to poke it with my finger.

I don’t. But I want to.

“Your turn. I’ve done like three.”

“Pick a song I know,” he tells his daughter who is still singing her heart out.

“I’m doing a solo, Daddy,” she snaps and goes back to it.

“My head is spinning.” I giggle, watching the little girl bend her legs and yell out the words to Let It Go. “I drank way too much whiskey.”

“Me too,” he agrees, eyes on his daughter too. “I don’t normally drink.”

“You work too much.”

He laughs at me incredulously. “You work just as much as I do.”

“True,” I reply, feeling giddy and less uptight now. “Maybe more these days. I can’t stop.”

He stretches his body, waiting for Maria to pick something he can sing to us.

She instead yawns really loudly and stretches her body just like her father just did.

Mr. C looks at his watch and blinks. “Yikes… I best be getting her home. It’s getting late.”

I almost feel disappointed.

“Just one more song, Daddy,” she begs, pouting at him.

He glances at me through the corner of his eye and holds his hand out for the mic. “Not tonight, Maria. Rose wants to sleep.”

“Are you trying to say I look bad?”

He laughs nervously. “I feel like no matter what way I answer this, I’m chancing a slap around the face.” Standing, he stretches again and puts his phone to his ear. So does that mean he thinks I’m ugly? Not that I care. “Bring the car around, we’re ready to go.”

“I’ll walk you out,” I say, catching Maria who throws herself at me to hug me. We both stumble because I’m a little tipsy and she’s a solid

little lump. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“Maria insisted,” he answers, scratching the back of his head. “We were in the area already visiting family.”

“Your sister?” I ask because I know that she only lives a couple of apartment buildings down from me. He nods in reply. “She’s nice, I like her.”

I’ve met her a few times, they work together but she’s more sexy science geek and not really interested in the sales side of the business so it’s rare we end up all working together. I know her mostly from when she’s come to take her brother for lunch, or he has needed me to call her to set up an appointment for something or other.

He clicks his tongue against his palate and points his thumb at the door. “See you at work tomorrow. Sleep in. I won’t need you until one.”

“You underestimate how much work I have to get done. I’ll be in at eight like always.”

“Fine, but I’ll bring the coffee this time.”

“No!” I blurt, placing my hand on his bicep but then I quickly release it because ewww. Touching is flirting to men… isn’t it? I don’t want him to think I’m coming on to him. “Don’t… I have to have it a really particular way.”

“It’s coffee.”

“But if it’s not the right coffee then my day is wrong.”

He blinks at me and sighs, but he still looks amused. “Okay then, you get the coffee. But don’t say I never do anything nice for you.”

“I wouldn’t even suggest it,” I reply.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Three

His smile and his laugh.

I hope it's not weird.

I mean… okay, yeah, it's weird. I don't like that he was in my space last night. It's made *me* feel weird. Has it made him feel weird?

I count my steps to take my mind off it. I'm obsessing.

"Mr. Conti," I say his full name, a statement to him and myself that I don't suddenly think we're friends.

He looks up from his desk as I approach and then place his coffee and bagel on the table.

"Eight AM sharp, as always," he states, checking his watch. "Not a second before or after." He's exaggerating about that last part… mostly. "Thank you, Rose."

I give him a salute *because that's not weird* and then turn and head to my desk which is just on the other side of his office door.

"Rose," he calls, and I stop to look at him with a slight smile.

"Yes, Mr. Conti?"

"Thank you for hosting us last night at such short notice."

I open and then close my mouth and also hold my breath. *Don't speak. Don't speak. Don't*—— "It wasn't short notice. It was no notice."

"Is that so?" he replies, his eyes alight with humor. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

"You didn't. It was——" I point my thumb at the door much like he did before he left last night. "I'm just going to do my job now."

"Right." His smile is stretching. The kind of smile one smiles when they see a puppy take an adorable tumble. "As you were then."

I finally make it to my desk and wipe my clammy hands on my oversized pants. I heard Mr. Conti's closest friend and business partner tell him that I wear the most hideous pant suits and that they should be burned.

I *accidentally* entered the system and deleted his calendar inputs for the week that day. It was a small and funny justice.

My pant suits should not be burned. They're tasteful, they cover up everything, they're tasteful, they cover up everything, they're… no. I

need to stop repeating.

I pick up my stress ball and squeeze it eighteen times because six add six add six. It helps. Now I feel a bit better.

The day drags but I get my jobs done, for the most part. The rest I can take home.

When five PM rolls around I pack up the things I need and place them neatly into my laptop bag.

I press the button on my desk that calls through to Mr. Conti.

"Do you need anything else before I leave?"

"Yes, actually, clear your weekend because we're going to Vegas."

I release the button and head into his office, knocking lightly on the door before entering.

"Problem?" he asks, knowing I won't start speaking until he gives me permission. Only on the job though. Not out of office hours. I'm not meek and feeble. I'm just… quirky and soft spoken.

"I have plans Saturday," I say, imploringly. "And Laurie doesn't take well to broken plans. She's like major schedule crazy. She already called me twice this morning to make sure I'm going."

He bites his lip and taps the edge of the desk with his fingers. I wait for him to respond.

He finally asks, "What is it you're doing?"

"Just going out for drinks."

"Well… I need your brain more than you need just a few drinks. I've got to make two presentations on Saturday in my father's place for some massive investments that we sorely need. He's fallen ill."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I grumble because it is sad that he's sick but also because I know I'm about to let my friend down. "I guess I can speak to her. Or try to."

He stares at me for the longest moment. "It's your birthday night out, isn't it?"

I nod. "It's been planned for a while now."

"And we all know how you are about breaking plans."

I nod again, smiling now. "Laurie is ten times worse."

He steeples his fingers under his nose, something he does when he's thinking. Then he declares, "Bring her. She can go sightseeing in the city while we work and then you can both go for drinks after you're done. I'll even book the flights for later on Sunday so you can both spend some time together."

I can't deny that this idea doesn't excite me. "On the company?"

"On the company."

"Like… everything on the company?"

He raises a brow. "Flights, meals, drinks. Any gambling comes out of your own dime. Got it?"

“Wow… okay. I mean, seeing as somebody else is paying,” I jest but I’m also being serious. “That’s super cool, Mr. C. Thanks.” I want to dance now but I’m not going to. “What time are we leaving and when?”

“Friday, I’ll send a car. Be ready by four.”

“Got it,” I squeak and skip out of the room with my phone to my ear. “LAURIE! Guess what we’re doing this weekend.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Four

He notices me.

The week dragged so hard, but I worked my ass off to clear our schedules for the weekend so that we only had this presentation to think about. Mr. Conti wasn't happy when I added an extra hour to each of his workdays, but I told him in a polite way, to suck it up.

I don't want to work all weekend. I want to spend it focusing on my favorite girl.

My favorite girl who is pressing the button for the air-conditioning above her head over and over again. Her mouth moving as she counts.

I leave her to it; she's not bothering anybody as it doesn't make a clicking noise. Mr. Conti does give her an odd look though. He's sitting opposite us both in this empty private jet. I imagine he'll move soon. He doesn't appreciate visible distractions.

"He is so hot," Laurie whispers in my ear for the fiftieth time.

"Ewww, please stop," I respond on a breath while pushing my glasses up my nose. "He's married and he's old."

"He's not even at silver fox status yet, he's so not old," she hisses back, eyeing my boss one more time. I pinch her thigh until she yelps. "I mean… not entirely. He has what, maybe fifteen grays?"

He has a few grays at his temples but not loads. I have the urge to count them now. So does Laurie.

When he feels us both staring at him he slowly looks up from his newspaper and glances nervously between us. "What?"

"Just counting your grays," Laurie admits because she's got absolutely no filter. She slaps a hand over her mouth.

I gape at her. "She's got Tourette's," I explain rapidly. "She didn't mean that. We weren't counting your grays."

"We were," Laurie blurts, unable to stop herself. "Seventeen grays."

"Do your exercises," I hiss as she physically holds her lips together with her fingertips.

Mr. C sighs and looks at his paper. "This is going to be a long weekend."

“POKE YOUR WEEKEND IN YOUR EYE.” Laurie tips a couple of pills into her mouth and swallows them with a large gulp of soda water. “I’m so sorry, guys. I’m nervous. Can I have the games page from that?”

Mr. C hands her the entire newspaper and she snatches it with gratitude. I hand her a pen and watch her start on the crossword puzzle.

That leaves Mr. C and me to just sit and look around awkwardly.

“So,” I say, clearing my throat and the silence. “Are you prepared for tomorrow?”

“I am. Are you?”

I tap my temple. “Got all of it in here.”

He nods and we lapse into an awkward silence.

Well, that is until Laurie yanks on her own fiery red braid, looks at her hand and snaps, “Stop it. Stupid limb.”

I pat her wrist and smile at Mr. C. “This weekend isn’t going to be long enough.”

We touch down just over an hour later, grab our bags and make the long journey to the hotel. The casino hotel.

As expected, Laurie and I have our own room and Mr. C has a room along the hall across the way. It’s such a nice place. The walls are clean, and it smells clean. The room looks clean, but I strip the bedding and put my own bedding on it anyway, getting tangled in the corner when it pings back over my face.

I don’t tell people about this little quirk of mine because they’d definitely think me weird.

I just love the smell of my own bed when I sleep. It’s not even about the germs… okay, so it kind of is about the germs and dead skin cells and hidden sperm stains. But whatever.

I don’t mind it and neither should anyone else.

“And you wonder why you’re single…” Laurie asks with her toothbrush hanging out of her mouth.

There are two doubles in this room and windows overlooking the strip, plus a fancy bathroom that I’m going to utilize soon.

“I don’t wonder why I’m single, *you* wonder why I’m single.”

“You’re a fine piece of female-candy,” she says and smacks my ass as I crawl backwards off my bed.

“Ouch,” I hiss rubbing the sore spot. “I’m not any kind of candy. I don’t want to be with anybody.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “You’ve got to let somebody into that scheduled little heart of yours.”

“You’re in it. You’re enough, thanks.”

Laughing, she goes back into the bathroom and I hear her rinse and spit. “Yes, but I don’t give you orgasms.”

I do not want to think of orgasms right now.

“I’m hungry,” I comment, completely ignoring her. It’s not like she can talk, she’s single too after all and life isn’t all about shacking up with somebody. Can’t I be married to my work?

“Me too. Room service?”

“I should ask Mr. Conti if he wants to join us.”

“Mrs. Cuntyflaps!” she screeches, and I give her a stern look. “Sorry…”

“What did I say?”

“It’s not like I can help it,” she replies, laughing at my obvious annoyance. If she says that in front of Mr. C, I could lose my job. “Cunty up your bedroom and the windows…” Her hand reaches up and she yanks on her braid again.

“Are you okay? Should we do your steps?”

“Yeah, probably.” She glares at her hand. “Fucking hate this thing sometimes.”

“It obviously hates you too.”

We laugh together but my laughter dies when I kneel on the floor by my suitcase and see something poking out from under the bed. There’s a quarter-inch gap between the wooden floor and the bed base. I touch the lip of it, it’s see-through and squishy.

What is that?

Using the tip of my manicured nail I drag it out.

“Ew… ew, ew, ew, ew.” I stand up, hopping from foot to foot. “GET RID OF IT!”

“What?” Laurie asks, peeks around me, and then starts to make vomiting noises.

“I can’t, I can’t… I touched it…” I shake my hand as Laurie uses something plastic to pick up the used condom. “I touched it. I touched it. I touched it.”

“Wash your hands,” she instructs softly.

My eyes are hazing over. I’m having a panic attack. Can’t breathe.

“Wash your damn hands!”

I somehow get to the sink and turn on the hot tap, covering my hands with soap and then I start to scrub. Scrub, scrub, scrub, scrub, scrub, rinse. Five and one make six.

Repeat six more times.

My hands are starting to hurt, but I only have three more times to go and then I’ll be good.

Laurie drags me away from the sink and puts a stress ball into my hands. I squeeze it six times and calm my breathing. “You good?”

I nod. “I’m good.”

“Good. Let’s go to dinner.”

“Where is it?”

“I flushed it.”

“Why’d you flush it?” I panic. “Now I’m not going to be able to sit on the toilet.”

“It’s not a big deal, everybody sits on the toilet,” she answers. “You know this. You can handle it just fine.”

“You’re right…” I answer feeling like an idiot. “I’m sorry. I’m being stupid.”

“No, you’re not, I get it, you know I do. I’m just surprised to see you so jittery like you are. You haven’t been this crazy in a long time.”

She’s the only person that gets to call me crazy.

“You need a break from work.”

“Maybe,” I reply, looking at my wristwatch. “I’m going to see if Mr. C wants to join us for dinner.”

“You do that, I’m going to hang up my dress for tomorrow.”

I pull open the door with my red hand and head down the hall to his room. Knocking on the door, I tighten my dark ponytail and put on a smile so he doesn’t know I just had a near incontrollable meltdown just forty seconds ago.

The door swings open. He’s holding his phone to his chest and looking at me expectantly.

“Do you want to join us for dinner?” I ask.

He looks down the hall, likely for Laurie and responds rudely, “Definitely not.” Then closes the door in my face. Perhaps he’s more like his wife than I thought.

Wow.

“What an ass,” I whisper, offended on my friend’s behalf. I’m not going to tell her because she’ll probably start calling him, Mr. Cuntyflaps too.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Five

His dark moods.

"I BELIEVE I CAN FLY!" Laurie sings at the top of her lungs and falls into a plant pot by the elevator.

I grab her arm, giggling hysterically as I try to pull her out.

"I BELIEVE I CAN TOUCH THE SKY!"

"That's not singing, honey, that's shrieking."

"Fuck you up your bum," Laurie grumbles, still smiling. "I'm not drunk yet. Let's go buy more drinks."

"No more drinks," I say, pulling her so hard she lands on me and we both fall to the floor. We are less than ten meters away from my door and she's crushing me into the dirty carpet and snoring. "Are you kidding me?" I shove her and try to wriggle my body under hers. "Laurie… wake up."

She mumbles something unintelligible and hiccups in my ear.

Oh bum cakes, as Laurie would say.

"Umm… help?" I squeak, using my chicken arms to try and roll her over but she's a massive dead weight.

With grunting and exertion on my part, I wriggle myself free and click my back when I stand. I let her have way too many cocktails. Or maybe I just didn't have enough. But I'm exhausted after the presentations today.

Mr. C almost fucked up in the middle and forgot his lines and I had to step in to help him remember, but then people started directing their questions to me. I saved his ass, but he was really annoyed with me for taking over.

He told me to stay in my lane and concentrate on my own job. Then he stormed away from me when we got back to the hotel and slammed his room door behind him.

Petulant idiot.

I grab Laurie's wrist and pull; she moves an inch. I pull again and she moves another inch. Then I drop her wrist and collapse onto the floor on my butt.

"This is too much. You're too heavy," I whine, wiping my brow on

my arm. “You absolute heavy lightweight.”

“What exactly are you doing?” Mr. C’s voice comes from somewhere behind me.

“I killed her and I’m getting rid of the body.” I stand, grab and pull again. “What does it look like I’m doing?” I’ve never taken such a tone with him but I’m still a bit sore about his treatment of me earlier.

He approaches and looks down at the snoring girl.

“How much did she drink?”

“The entire bar,” I respond, laughing when she giggles in her sleep. “Can you… maybe… help me?”

“I suppose I don’t have a choice,” he replies, his lips twitching.

He crouches beside the snoring female and hooks her arm around his neck. Then he stands with her, not as easy as it looks, and moves towards my room, grunting at how deadweight she is. I quickly open the door and hold it as he squeezes past. He’s wearing that citrussy aftershave again. So nice.

“Thank you,” I mutter and Laurie groans in his arms.

She wakes up and nuzzles his neck.

“Ugh… yes! Best night ever,” Laurie announces, her words slurring. I throw one of her shoes out of the way, so he doesn’t trip, almost stumbling on the other one myself as I go. “You’re so handsome, Mr. C!”

“Thank you,” he replies, thankfully sounding amused.

“Rose thinks you’re old and boring, but I think you’re sooooo hot.”

Oh God. She just had to.

I press the heels of my palms to my eyes and turn around to compose myself. My cheeks are on fire.

Laughing, he deposits her on her bed, and before I can even count to six, she’s snoring again.

Now I don’t know what to say or do.

“Goodnight, Rose,” he tells my back and I hear him move to the door. Just as he pulls it open, I call his name. Unable to stop myself.

He halts and asks, his tone amused, “Yes, Rose?”

“I didn’t call you boring,” I insist, looking at him now with wide eyes. I twist my hands in front of me. “I never once said that.” Then, when he just continues to stare at me, I add with a cringe, “I did say you were old though… but not like you look old because you don’t but just because she’s got a bit of a…” I’m rambling. I inhale and get to the point. “You’re not boring, and you don’t look old.”

Now I exhale. I think that went well.

I count, tapping my foot on the floor six times and then six again.

He stares at me forever. His eyes trailing over my face, making me feel self-conscious and on the spot. “Why six?”

“Sorry?”

"You usually always count in sixes when you do your… *thing*."

Oh God. He noticed. Of course, he did.

He walks to my minibar and opens it, peering inside for a moment, bending over to fully see the contents. Glass clinks as he moves things around and then stands with two cans of ready mixed whiskey and lemonade.

"Why six?" he asks again, sitting on one of the two comfy armchairs by the big windows overlooking the strip. He passes me a drink and I accept it while claiming the armchair across from his. There's approximately a meter of distance between the front left leg of his chair and the front right leg of mine.

I push my hair back and smile a cringe. It's not something I talk about because it brings the mood down.

"My parents abandoned me when I was six."

"Oh…" He wets his lips, such kissable-looking lips. Mrs. Conti is a lucky lady. Not that I want to kiss him. It's just an observation. "I'm so sorry."

"Me too, I'd have liked parents growing up. Sometimes I really needed them."

"I can imagine," he replies, smiling sadly. "Did they just up and leave one day?"

I shake my head and cringe again. "No, they erm… physically abandoned me on train tracks in the middle of nowhere."

His jaw hits the floor, showing his pink tongue and unblemished teeth. "What the fuck?"

"Yeah, they told me to count the tracks until I reached two hundred and then they'd be back."

With wide eyes he splutters for something to say.

"They never came back." I sip my drink. It's nice, if not rather bitter. "I got to one hundred and eighty before the train came. Which is six multiplied by thirty. And thirty is also a multiple of six. I focused on the numbers a lot. Can you tell?"

He pushes his hair back and looks at me dumbfounded. "Did you get hit by the train?"

I blink and with a monotone voice I reply, "Yes. I did."

"That's horrific."

"It is. I'm dead now. I'm a ghost. Can't you tell?"

He throws a pen at me that was tucked into the breast pocket of his shirt. It bounces off my right boob. "Oh HA. HA. Miss jokester."

Giggling, I take another gulp of my drink and push my glasses up my nose. "So yeah, my ex-therapist thinks that's where I get my counting from. Because I nearly died all on the same day that my parents abandoned me. I think they were hoping I got hit and died so they could claim it was an accident. I used the numbers as a way to

focus on anything but the reality that my parents hated me so much." I look away unable to face his scrutiny. "You think I'm a freak, don't you?" Before he can answer I continue, "I know I'm weird… I totally know I am. And it can be annoying at times but——"

"I don't think you're a freak," he cuts in, looking at me with a genuine gaze. I sense no lie here. "I think you're an amazing PA and a really good person."

Okay… now I kinda want to hug him but not in a sexual way. I smile, feeling my cheeks warm again but because of his compliment this time. "Thanks, Mr. C."

Our eyes hold each other's for a long moment, and something dances between us. Something innocent, pure, new, exciting. Are we becoming friends?

He looks away when Laurie groans loudly and rolls over in her bed. When she starts snoring again, he sighs and stands. "I should go. I'll come and get you both at about five tomorrow."

"Excellent. We're just gonna sunbathe by the pool."

"You? Sunbathe?" He laughs and looks me up and down. "Has your body ever seen the sun?"

"Nope, and it's not going to. Laurie is sunbathing, I'm going to sit in my body tent and read."

Still laughing, he exits the room with me following at his heels.

He turns back, gray eyes twinkling with humor and happiness. "Goodnight, Rose."

"Goodnight, Mr. C."

I close the door and rest against it. Why is my heart beating so rapidly?

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Six

He sees me and my sixes.

"Morning, Pax," I say cheerfully as I enter Mr. C's office with bagels. "I come bearing gifts."

"That's kind of you," Pax replies, watching me place the individually wrapped bagels onto Mr. C's desk.

Mr. C ends his phone call and then narrows his eyes on me, he looks tired and disheveled but then he has been up for nearly two days straight. He does this sometimes, especially when he's working on something big. He loves work so much he often forgets that the rest of the world keeps moving. "You've been working for me for nine months and you still haven't booked any annual leave. I meant to talk to you about it yesterday."

"I don't have plans yet," I reply.

"I told you to make them."

I cross my eyes at Pax. "Think he needs a break from me?"

"If that's true, you can come and work for me instead," Pax suggests, his usual flirtatious smile in place.

Pax is just a few years older than me and runs public relations. He's brilliant at his job though and has risen to the top in no time at all.

He's very charming so it's no surprise and is extremely adorable, with cheeks slightly too big for his face and deep, long dimples that lead to thick lips.

I may or may not have a slight crush on him. So much so that now that he has moved to the office next to Mr. C's I try to find any excuse to bump into him.

It's not that I want to date him, but he makes me feel good when he gives me attention. Even though he gives *every* girl attention.

Maybe I can be the one to tame him?

Ugh… I sound like such an idiot. I've been reading too many romance novels.

He pushes his hair back, smiling so that his lower lip just covers half of the top row of his teeth.

Swoon.

"Hands off my Rose," Mr. C replies in jest, winking at me in a friendly way. Something he hasn't done for a while because he's been a pompous ass.

His rose? That's kind of cute.

"Maybe we can share her? I have yet to find a personal assistant that doesn't stumble over their feet and my schedule," he mutters, sighing gravely, flexing his head from side to side.

"I don't mind helping where I can," I respond while trying not to flutter my eyes like some sex-hungry fiend.

Mr. C gives me a look. "You get paid to work for me and my team, not a different sector entirely."

I raise a brow and retort, "I run errands for your wife, what's the difference? At least my time is being spent on your company."

"Ooooh, she's got bite, I like it." Pax continues grinning at me and I try not to wet my panties.

"Since when do you run errands for my wife?" Mr. C asks firmly, looking frustrated.

"Since always." I look away as his stern gaze bores into me. I quickly add a quiet, "I don't mind, of course. I'm always happy to help."

I sound like such a brownnoser, but the truth is that the busier I am, the happier I am.

Mr. Conti stares at me for a moment longer and then looks at Pax and then back at me. "We'll continue this conversation later. Get back to work."

"Yes, sir," I mutter and glare right back at him before stomping away. Annoyed that he has dismissed me like a child. "You're welcome, by the way. For lunch."

I hear the wheels of his chair drag as he stands and his hands slap on the table. "I pay you to do your job, I don't have to be grateful every time you do something!"

I feel my composure snap, turning back to him because his foul mood with me as of late has been seriously grating on me. "Are you kidding me right now? Do you know what day it is?"

With blazing eyes, he opens his mouth to answer but then checks the expensive smart watch on his wrist and mutters a curse.

"Exactly, *it's Saturday*, my day off." My hands ball into fists at my side. "I brought you both an early lunch because I knew you wouldn't eat otherwise and *your wife* has been screaming down the phone at *me* all morning because you aren't answering *your* phone and you didn't take Maria to the zoo like you promised. So… guess who's taking *your* daughter to the zoo after this so that *you* can finish doing what you're doing and so she'll stop crying and so your wife will stop screaming at

me?" I tighten my bun and raise my chin. "You can discipline me all you want on *your* time, Mr. Conti, but don't berate me on mine. I'll let your wife know you're still alive."

With that, I turn on my heel, feeling exhilarated and alive. I have never spoken to him like that before, but he has been a massive asshole for the past few weeks. Constantly speaking to me like I'm nothing but dirt on the bottom of his shoe.

We usually work so well together but not lately. He's just such a grouch. And truth be told, the way Mrs. Conti speaks to me and has me constantly doing shit for her that takes me well out of the way, that's been getting to me too.

They treat me like their slave and they never smile at me anymore.

It used to be that the job was enough for me. It used to make me so happy but now I dread coming into work. Well… apart from to see Pax of course.

I drive to their house in the suburbs, a fifty-minute drive, to pick up a very excited Maria.

We go to the zoo, another long drive, and I hold her hand while we walk around each exhibit, checking out the giraffes and the lions who are sleeping as always. They never move when I come, lazy cats.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and Maria's face falls when I check it.

"It's your father," I explain, putting the phone to my ear while still holding her hand. "Yes, Mr. Conti?"

"Where are you?"

"At the zoo."

He sighs as though aggravated. "Where at the zoo?"

"The lions."

"Stay there."

"But——"

"Stay. There."

I look at Maria's curious eyes. "Daddy's coming, I think, so we've got to wait right here for him."

"YAY!" she cheers, jumping up and down, almost spilling the drink in her hand.

I take it from her after stuffing my phone back into my bag and look around us. It's busy today and so warm a day even for October but I don't mind heat. People often ask me how I don't melt in the clothes I wear but they're baggy so I don't particularly feel it as much as they'd think and everywhere I go there's air-conditioning. Besides, when Mr. Conti gets here, it'll be downright frosty.

"Daddy!" Maria yells happily after a couple of minutes waiting and she races into the thickening crowds.

“Maria,” I shout, following her. “I know you want to see your dad but please don’t take off like…” He scoops her up into his arms without incident and I feel silly for telling her off, especially in front of him. Some parents get so weird about it but he doesn’t seem to mind. “…that.” I wet my lips and give him a flat look when he offers me a smile.

I might be meek and non-confrontational, but that doesn’t mean I’ll roll over whenever somebody offers me a bit of kindness. Especially when I’m not being paid, and they’ve made it clear they only value me because I’m paid.

“Okay,” I say handing Maria her drink back as her father holds her tight and her eyes round with sorrow. “I will see you on Tuesday for soccer practice.”

“You’re going?” she asks, looking torn between her father and me.

“It’s your daddy’s turn and I’ve got a ton of things to do.”

“Like what?” she asks sadly.

Mr. C adds, “Yes, like what?”

Oh, if his tone doesn’t just rub salt into the wound he made. Gah.

I glare at him. “Like looking for a new job.”

“Okay, I deserve that,” he tells me, putting his daughter down and smiling. “Don’t look for a new job. We have a great thing going.”

“*You* have a great thing going. Not me. I’m starting to hate my job,” I admit, surprised at my own candor. “I’m starting to hate you. Which sucks because I used to really like you but you’re so grouchy and nothing is good enough for you these days.”

“You sound like my wife,” he mutters, and we walk, letting Maria guide us to the next exhibit.

Butterflies. I love this one.

“Speaking of your wife, tell her to stop screaming at me whenever you do something wrong. It’s getting tiring. I’m not an extension of you. I don’t mind listening to her vent or whatever but it’s like she blames me when you do things.”

“I didn’t realize she had been,” he grumbles, rubbing his face with both hands. “I apologize, we’ve all been under a lot of pressure lately and this is not how I want my family represented. I’ll have a word with Elizabeth.”

“You’re still going to take me to soccer though, right?” Maria asks.

I nod, tugging playfully on her braid. “Every Tuesday.”

“And then ice cream and pizza?”

“Duh, it’s my favorite day of the week.” I’m not even lying either. I love hanging out with Maria, she’s a sweet kid. Ice cream and pizza is an added bonus.

“My wife has you taking Maria to soccer practice?” Mr. Conti seethes.

“And piano recital, and she came to the school bake sale two weeks ago.”

“Your wife is busy,” I reply softly, defending a woman who has always been vile to me.

“Doing what? She’s a kept woman with one child and paid fucking maids to tend the house.” He rips a hand through his dark hair and looks up at the clear sky.

I place my hand on his arm. “I don’t mind, I don’t want to cause issues between you and your wife. I don’t mind doing things if I have the time.”

He sighs and looks at Maria. “What was the last thing you and Mommy did together?”

“Don’t ask her that,” I hiss at him, my jaw dropping.

Maria looks frightened, scared of saying the wrong thing. She pulls on my hand and points to the butterfly exhibit.

“Let’s go,” I whisper, nodding for Mr. C to follow.

He does so begrudgingly but I can see him becoming increasingly agitated.

As soon as we’re through the flaps of the dome-shaped greenhouse, butterflies swarm us, making Maria squeal with glee. We follow her around for a while. Mr. C has his phone in his hand the entire time.

I shouldn’t say anything, it’s not my place.

“Please get off your phone.” I stop him, keeping one eye on Maria as she chases a big purple butterfly.

His lips pinch together.

“I know you’re mad or whatever, but Maria is——”

“How many kids do you have?” he barks at me.

“None.”

“Then stay in your lane,” he snaps, and my mouth clamps shut.

“Look, Daddy!” Maria cries, and we stop glaring at each other to look her way. There’s a huge blue and black butterfly on her head and the way she’s standing, arms out and bent, legs the same, so she doesn’t startle it into flying away, has us both smiling. “It likes me! Can we keep it?”

“You’d want to take it away from its beautiful home because it gave you a hug?” I ask just as a butterfly lands on the top of my glasses and flutters its wings. I look up at it and then at Mr. Conti who is watching me intently. “Sorry, not my lane.”

He laughs and I’m surprised when he hooks me around the shoulders and hugs me into his side. This is positively awkward. “Come on, grumpy, let’s get something to eat before you spontaneously combust and set all the butterflies on fire.”

“It’s laughable that you think *I’m* the grumpy one,” I grumble, escaping his warm, strong arm.

I snap off a flower from the exhibit and use it to coax the butterfly from my glasses. We exit moments later, looking for the café so we can get some well-earned food.

I find us a table as Mr. C gets the drinks and snacks, and Maria races over to a nearby play area to swing from monkey bars upside down.

I watch her with a smile on my face, she is such a nice kid. Never any bother.

"I'm sorry," Mr. C says the moment he takes the seat next to me. "I've been a jerk."

I scan him through my thick lenses, wondering if the sincerity I see on his face is genuine or his wall practiced lie to appease people, such is his line of work.

"We've been working together for nine months," he continues as I stir my latte and then take a sip to test if it's sweet enough. "We're bound to get a bit irate with each other from time to time, we see each other nearly every day. I'm surprised we haven't fought sooner, but you're usually so calm. You just brush my temper off your shoulder like it doesn't bother you."

"Should it bother me?"

"I don't mean it. I don't mean to be rude and upset you," he explains, placing his hand on my wrist on the table. His hands are so large, his fingers calloused and thick. "And I will have a word with my wife, and myself about being nicer people." When he smiles at me his sweetest smile, I feel my outer frost melt. "Can you forgive me? Can we move on from this?"

I nod, rubbing my wrist when he releases it to relieve myself of the lingering tingles. "I'm sorry for speaking to you like that in front of another employee. That was super unprofessional and it's making me jittery just thinking about it."

"I deserved it. I should have thanked you for lunch. But you shouldn't be coming in on your days off."

"I don't mind it, I enjoy it, and I never want to give you reason to regret employing me."

He laughs, throwing his head back and this time his hand closes over mine. "You've already surpassed any PA I have ever had." He releases me as quick as he touched me. "Speaking of which… Wednesday to Friday we'll be visiting WhyTech E in Houston. Can you handle it?"

"I'll set up our rooms."

"Thank you," he makes it a point to say this to my eyes with a smile.

"You don't have to thank me for doing my job."

"No, but I'll start making more of a point to," he replies, grinning

as he brings his drink to his lips. “I do appreciate all you do; I don’t want you to think I don’t.”

A coil of happiness tingles its way through my body, warming me.

“I can’t remember a time you’ve ever said no to me.”

“That’s because I’m not sure I ever could,” I reply and quickly look away, feeling my cheeks flush pink.

“Is that so? Maybe I’ll put that theory to the test,” he remarks boldly in jest and innocence.

Fortunately, our food arrives, breaking the awkwardness I felt at his and my words.

I’m being silly anyway. There’s an inuendo in everything if you’re dirty minded enough and I am *not* dirty minded.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Seven

He adores his daughter.

"Rose." Pax's voice startles me as he passes, rapping his knuckles on my solid wooden desk as he goes. "Sheathed your claws since Saturday?"

I nod, blushing as his eyes linger on me. "I apologize for that, it's not an accurate portrayal of who I am or how I conduct myself."

"Relax, it's all good, you should hear some of the things I have spat at my bosses over the years." He sits on the curved corner of my desk and beams down at me. "You're both leaving for Houston soon, right?"

"We are. Wednesday."

"I love Houston, it's a great city. So many things to do and see. Don't let the big man keep you all to himself."

Smiling, I tap my fingers on my thighs where he can't see, counting to twelve to calm my nerves. "He's usually really cool like that, let's me get my sightseeing in before we go."

"He doesn't join you?" he enquires politely, pushing his gorgeous honey blond hair back. Why is he so attractive?

I shake my head. "He's too busy."

"Who's too busy to spend the day sightseeing with a gorgeous woman on his arm?"

I blink slowly. I can't believe he just called me gorgeous. "He… well… he's married and I just I guess it's not really appropriate."

"I'm not married," Pax adds, his signature smile in place.

"Leave the poor girl alone, Pax," Mrs. Conti declares as she passes. I hadn't heard her arrive. "She wants to remain disease free."

Pax pulls a face at her back as she strolls towards Mr. C's office.

"Is he free?" she asks and then pushes the doors open when I nod.

"Good morning, Mrs. Conti," I say.

"Morning," she replies cheerily and then the door closes behind her.

"For the record, I don't have any diseases," Pax jests, leaning towards me.

“I’m not sleeping with you, so I don’t care,” I respond, looking at my laptop. Why did I say that? Why?

He’s not offended, instead he laughs so loud the eyes of those in the distance come our way. When he’s calmed down, he stands and stretches in his expensive suit. “See you when you get back then, I guess?”

“Hope so,” I reply bravely, looking away when his eyes meet mine because they’re so intense.

Could he like me too?

He wanders away, whistling happily as he goes.

The speaker on my desk beeps, and so does the piece in my ear signaling an incoming from the boss man.

I hear raised voices coming through the door, mostly Mrs. Conti’s so I press the button to accept it and immediately remove my earpiece when her shrill voice assaults my fragile eardrum.

I’m about to disconnect the call, realizing they obviously didn’t mean to come through to me, when Mrs. Conti snarls, “You’re going to take her word over mine?”

“She’s not our nanny,” Mr. C replies and I wonder if they’re talking about me. “And she’s not *your* employee, she’s mine.”

“We’re married. If I need to use your employees…”

“Then do so but let me know so I can pay them accordingly! And don’t speak to them like shit. Especially Rose.”

There’s a pause and I find myself holding my breath.

“What do you mean, *especially* Rose?” She is really mad, practically seething, I could hear it in her voice.

“I mean because she’s soft spoken and kind, she doesn’t need to be yelled at and that’s not your job. It’s my job to discipline my employees. Not yours! Especially when she’s doing your errands for free.”

I want to cheer him on, happy that he’s got my back.

Her voice gets scary as she asks, “Soft spoken and kind?”

“Yes. She’s good to me, to us…”

“Did *she* tell you I’ve been shouting at her?”

“Liz…”

“What else do you say about me when I’m not here?”

I hear him hit something, maybe his desk, and his voice grows louder with frustration. “We don’t talk about you. We don’t fucking talk at all!”

“Sounds like you do more than talk the way you’re defending her.” Now she’s being irrational and stupid, she’s grasping at straws for things to fight about. “Have you fucked her?”

My hand flies to my mouth. I can’t believe she’d even ask that.

“Elizabeth,” he rebuts, his tone one of warning. “Don’t test me.”

“Have you?”

“NO! Have you seen my wife lately, she’s fucking gorgeous? Why would I need to go elsewhere? Especially to somebody who still dresses like a twelve-year-old emo.”

“She is a bit embarrassing to look at.” Mrs. Conti laughs, happy at their insults as I look down at my black oversized blazer and dark purple button-up. “You promise? You’ve never even thought about her like that?”

“No,” he replies, the word elongated. “The only time I’ve ever thought of her body is when I’ve been trying to decide if she even has one or just a floating head and fabric.”

“She must be a big girl, size of her clothes. She probably buries herself so we don’t notice. She ordered a man’s size jersey for Maria’s soccer practice.”

“Of course she did,” he utters, laughing too now like his wife just was. “That’s so like her.

“Come here,” he says to his wife and her laughter becomes a soft, seductive giggle. “I love you. I’d have to be crazy to cheat on you with *her*. She’s got nothing on you.”

I end the call, feeling my fists clench. I count to sixty this time because I’m so fucking angry.

I’m just the butt of their joke. The meek little girl.

I head to the bathroom to wash my face, turning the corner of our floor near where Pax’s office is and his terrible PA Julia sits outside chatting as per usual.

“Did you hear them bang?” Julia’s voice whispers on a laugh and I stop at the corner.

“No, we got disconnected after they started talking about Rose.” Miranda is the one who says this, her tone amused.

Oh my God. It must have been a glitch, either that or Mr. C hit the wrong button. Did everybody hear what they said?

“So true though. She looks like a walking charity shop. Those suits and those glasses.”

“Right? So gross. My grandma wears those shoes.”

“Ladies,” Pax barks. “Don’t you have work to be doing?”

“We were just——”

“I know what you were *just*,” he snarls. “I don’t want to hear you talking about your colleague like that again, am I clear?”

“Yes, Mr. Pax,” Julia mutters, sounding ashamed.

“You’re too old to be bullies, I’ll not have it. If I ever hear you talking ill of Rose again, it’ll be your job.”

Miranda laughs, “Chill out, Pax. It’s not like we were saying anything bad about her personally. She’s a sweet girl, she’s just a bit weird.”

“Go back to your own office, Miranda,” Pax replies and I hear his door slam.

I rush back to my desk, shaking with sadness. My heart is beating wildly in my chest and I feel sick. Pax had my back, but he didn’t disagree with them. He didn’t say he liked the way I looked.

When Mrs. Conti leaves looking more disheveled than when she arrived, I stand and knock on the door to Mr. C’s office before entering.

He’s checking his tie in the mirror on the wall when I step inside. So glad I ended the call when I did.

“Everything okay, Rose?”

“I’m taking the rest of the day off,” I assert, raising my chin and meeting his eyes.

“Why? What’s wrong?” His concerned eyes look me up and down, assessing my face and body. Despite the fact I’m overdressed I suddenly want to cover myself. “You look distressed.”

“I’m fine,” I reply, looking at my watch. Still angry at the things that have been said about me. I’m probably the joke of the entire building. “Can I go?”

“Whatever you need,” he responds, taking a step towards me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

My jaw trembles so I bite on my lower lip. “Don’t… please… I just need some time alone.”

I hate myself for being so weak, for crying in Mr. C’s presence. I despise myself for letting their words affect me but I’m only human. I’ve never been one to care what people think, but I didn’t realize I was the laughingstock of the office.

“You’re crying,” he states as I angrily wipe my tears away. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t,” I beg and step backwards. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

I exit the room as quickly as my legs can carry me and shoulder my bag after grabbing it from under the desk.

I press the button for the elevator eighteen times, and then eighteen more, rapidly hitting it with my fingertip until the doors open.

I need to go home.

I just need to be alone.

Approximately six hours and two boxes of tissues and chocolates later, there’s a gentle knock at my door. That’s odd because anybody visiting me would need to be buzzed in first.

They probably have the wrong door number.

I approach the door feeling lethargic and anxious. Not because of whoever is knocking but because I can't get what they were all saying about me out of my head. It's making me nauseous. I don't want to be the freak or the weird one. I want to be the invisible one.

When I open it I declare, "Oh my God… noooo."

And when I try to shut it in his face, he sticks his foot in the gap and it bounces back, almost getting my toes.

"I don't want to see you right now," I whine pathetically, turning away from him and covering my face under my glasses which means they'll be smudged when I remove my hands.

"I am so sorry, Rose," Mr. Conti insists, gently but sincerely.

"Please just go so I can pretend this day never happened." I keep my back to him, genuinely wishing he would just leave.

"Rose," he tries but I turn on him, mad and annoyed.

"No." I raise my hand. "Please. Just go."

"I am so sorry," he whispers, looking genuinely devastated for the most part. "I didn't mean what I said."

I snort, pulling back so he can't take my hand like he wants to.

"I just said it to appease Liz and I know that's not an excuse." He reaches for me again. "I don't think your outfits are that of a twelve-year-old emo."

"Oh my God," I breathe, taking another step back. "Stop."

"I think most of your clothes are very nice and reserved. It's nice to see a young lady covering up for once, valuing her self-respect."

I blink at him. "So now you're shaming women who don't cover up?"

"No," he corrects looking panicked. "That's not what I meant either."

"Then what do you mean, Ezra? Because you're not making me feel any better about myself right now."

He pushes his hair back with both hands and puffs out his cheeks. We look at each other for a long moment as he gathers his thoughts and thinks about what point he's trying to make. "I'm saying I'm sorry for hurting you."

"Okay," I respond flatly. "Now can you go?"

"I've put in a personal complaint to HR about the situation, myself, Julia, and Miranda, so if there is ever a time you feel bullied by me, them, or anybody because of my actions today, it's logged and it will be dealt with."

"You didn't," I breathe, feeling even more alarmed now. "Why would you do that? Now I'll get called in to make a statement and everybody will think I'm weak and care about what you said."

"Reporting a bully isn't weakness."

"I just… I can't do this right now." I push against his arm. "Go.

Please just go.”

“Not until you tell me how to make this up to you.”

“You can’t,” I yell, and I think this might be the first time in my entire life that I’ve ever yelled. “So please… just drop it.”

He looks down, ashamed. “I really am sorry.”

“I believe that, but it doesn’t change how I feel or how you made me feel. I’m the laughingstock of the entire building.” I fold my arms over my chest.

“They heard me having sex with my wife, trust me, they’re paying more attention to that part.”

Well, he’s probably right about that. “That was your choice. You should be more careful with the location of your quickies.”

He grins boyishly, not looking ashamed about that part in the slightest.

“Please go. This is humiliating enough without you standing there in my apartment, witnessing all that is this.” I motion to myself and the blanket on the sofa behind me.

“I’ll leave you to your peace.” Blowing out a harsh breath he turns back to the door. “I understand if you don’t want to come back to work for me, but I really hope you do.”

When he pulls it open my body tenses and my word vomit spews forth. “Just for the record, I do have a body under my clothes and it’s really nice too. So you totally don’t know what you’re even talking about.”

He grins at me over his shoulder and looks me up and down slowly. “I have no doubts.”

Why did I say that?

Why, oh why, did I say that?

He leaves and I feel that stupid thumping in my chest again.

I don’t know what it means, and I don’t care to know.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eight

He's not afraid to apologize when he's wrong.

At work the next day, after building myself back up after my little meltdown, I'm surprised to find two huge bouquets of flowers on my desk.

Now… don't get me wrong, I think flowers are beautiful, but these are so large they're offensive.

They're also a reminder of the day before and I hate that.

Still, I pick up a card attached to the sparkling white bouquet of flowers I can't name and read it. It's from so many people. There are so many encouraging messages within from people I've never even met. Messages such as, *"You're killing your style, girl, keep at it. Fuck the haters and their stuck-up wives."* That one made me laugh. *"People can be mean and childish no matter their age. Beauty is inside, they are proof of that."* That one makes me smile. *"I don't know you, we've never met, but I see you all the time. You're adorable. Keep gracing us with those shy smiles that make our day."* I smile shyly, it's what I do best. *"*Sending Hugs*"* I laugh again and close the card after absorbing every message squeezed into every available space.

I move those flowers to the window and prop the card up with them.

Then I take the smaller card from the offensive bouquet of purple and yellow flowers. So pretty.

"I really am sorry."

Two guesses who that's from. I put that one on the curved part of the desk behind me and push the flowers as close to the wall as they'll go.

My coworkers are sweet.

Mr. C is just saving his own ass.

"I wasn't sure you'd come back," Pax announces as he rounds the far corner where I stood and eavesdropped on his bitch of a PA

yesterday. “But I knew you were fierce. The offer to switch to my team is still there though.” He’s only half joking.

I stand from my seat and meet him eye to eye, coming around the desk to face him. I made a vow this morning that I’d be braver today and that’s exactly what I’m doing. “I heard you defend me yesterday.”

His smile fades to a grimace. “You heard what they said?”

I nod and offer him a smile. “I did, but… what you did… it meant a lot.”

“You’re adorable and kind, Rose, you don’t deserve anything that happened yesterday.” I’m surprised when he reaches up to touch my cheek, making me hold my breath. “And I happen to love the way you dress.” His hand drops and his mischievous smile comes back. “More clothing you’re wearing, the more wrapping there is to tear away.”

I laugh once, a startled sound coming from my throat. “You… I… umm…”

“So, you’re back Friday?” he continues, still smiling his handsome smile.

“Yeah, why.”

“Then how does Saturday at six sound?”

Now I’m confused. “For what?”

“For our date.”

I blink and widen my eyes. “Our date?”

“Yep. I’m going to take you out somewhere extremely fun, and then drive you home like a gentleman.”

I gape at him and laugh again. “I’m not going on a pity date with you.”

Chuckling, he steps closer and gently touches my chin to tilt my head back. His body is inches from mine. I feel like a bitch in heat. “It’s not a pity date. I was going to ask you anyway.”

“I don’t believe you. Look… you’re kind and all but you don’t have to do this.”

His smile fades. “Do you really think so little of yourself that somebody might not ask you on a date for genuine reasons?”

“But… it’s you, I’m *not* your type.”

I squeak when he pushes me against the wall beside Mr. C’s office door and crushes his mouth to mine. His lips, so warm, slightly moist and soft, move against my own, coaxing me to comply and I melt into it, allowing his tongue to taste mine.

I hum, my hands gripping the lapels of his suit jacket as his body presses mine into the wall. We kiss forever until things start to get more heated and his erection presses against my hip.

When he pulls back, panting, his eyes on mine, he sucks on my lower lip and smiles. “Saturday, six PM. And wear whatever the fuck you want.”

He straightens up and smooths down his jacket before walking away, leaving me with the need to change my panties.

I look around after admiring his strong, tall form vanish around the corner, and make sure nobody saw us before heading back to my desk.

Was he being genuine? Can you fake a kiss like that? He's so good at it. I've never been kissed like that before. But then… he is a player.

"That was so hot even I need to fan myself," Miranda comments, stepping out of the elevator behind me and to the right. "I didn't want to interrupt so I just kept the door open until you were done."

She smiles a fake smile with perfect white teeth and dark red hair to her jaw. Miranda is one of those naturally sexy women that doesn't ever come into work looking less than desirable. But then it's rumored that she has had affairs with at least two married men in the building. She likes the thrill of the taboo, or so Julia says. Not that I speak to Julia, she just likes to gossip to anybody she thinks is listening.

She's as bad as Wayne who does errands for everybody on this floor and the one below. He's a huge gossip. I try not to speak to him much. I don't like people like that, they make me nervous. I don't like getting suckered into drama and I don't like talking badly of people, but I'm not brave enough to say anything like Pax did.

I should be. I should defend others, but I don't have any power here. I'd just become their next target.

"Well done you, Pax is a catch," she adds as she saunters past, hips swaying and heels clicking on the wooden floor.

My speaker buzzes, I almost daren't put my earpiece in, but I do and I press the button to receive the call.

"Yes, Mr. C?"

"Thank you for coming back, Rose."

"Glad to be here, Mr. C. Is the line secure now?"

"Definitely, I had it all recalibrated."

Phew. "Good. Thank you for my flowers."

"Does that mean you forgive me?" he asks boyishly, and I can just see the smile on his face despite the fact he's not here.

I laugh quietly. "Not yet, but maybe one day."

"I'll just have to try harder."

"Oh God, please no more huge bouquets."

"You don't like flowers?" His tone is humorous and not offended in the slightest.

I bite my lip, stifling my laugh. "They're an offensive gift. I have nowhere to put them."

"Right, because they don't line up with anything."

"Exactly. If you're going to buy me something for any reason in future, I love stationary, notebooks… if you're feeling really generous

there's the new MacBook…"

His laughter is booming at that remark. "I'll bear that in mind. But on your salary, I think you can afford to buy yourself the new MacBook."

"Definitely, but then I'd have to justify the expense to myself and I'm too rigid with my finances to ever let myself buy a new piece of tech when I have tech that works."

"Rigid," he murmurs, still laughing under his breath. "If I bought you a MacBook, would you forgive me?"

"It'd be an excellent start," I jest, feeling a fluttering in my chest. "Do you want me to fetch you lunch today, Mr. C?"

"No, thank you, Rose. Why can't you just call me Ezra? You did yesterday?"

"I did?"

"Yes, in your apartment."

I wet my lips and rack my brain. "I was mad, I guess I got a bit personal there. I'm sorry."

"I prefer it when you call me Ezra."

"You don't make anybody else call you Ezra. Why do you want me to?"

He pauses, likely thinking of a good answer. His reply is not what I'm expecting. "It just sounds… *nice* when you say it."

I've said it maybe a handful of times in the past when he's corrected me, or like yesterday when we had that heated discussion in my apartment.

How do I say no to that request?

He is my boss after all. I guess I just still don't feel comfortable being so personal with him.

"Buy me a MacBook and I'll think about it."

When he laughs again that fluttering in my chest increases tenfold. It's excitement and happiness that I've made him laugh. He has a nice laugh; I can admit that even while I'm still hurt by him.

"You've got a call coming through," I say softly. "Later, Mr. C."

"Ezra," he corrects, and our line goes dead.

I answer the phone and put the man through, then sit back and look at my perfect desk.

Mr. C and I have *never* spoken like that over the speaker, phone, face to face or anything. Once upon a time I thought we might be becoming friends and I realized how wrong I was. Now he seems to be trying and it's probably too late because I will never trust him again. He stabbed me in the back. How does one forgive that?

The past two days have been awkwardly pleasant, I'm glad they're over and we're on our way to Houston. People in the building have been so nice to me but I just don't want the attention. They've been offering me compliments, stopping me to talk, disturbing my schedule, inviting me out for lunch and dinner.

It's amazing, they're amazing, but I'm just not very good with people. I'm awkward and jittery and after a while I start to irritate them.

Mr. C has been respectful and courteous, how he used to be but kinder now. He smiles more and speaks to me more like a friend would, cracking jokes and laughing at the things I say, enticing me into a conversation.

"Do you want to play snap?" he asks me, sitting on the seat opposite from where I'm reading a book on a plush, leather couch on the plane. This private jet is one of the most luxurious we've ever been on. Oh how the other half live.

Though I suppose I could be classed as the *other half* what with my lifestyle.

"Snap?"

"You don't know what snap is?" he asks, raising his brows as his hands shuffle a deck of cards.

"I know what it is, I'm just not good at playing." I cringe but also don't want to turn him down. He's bored and this is a three-hour flight.

"Snap is the easiest card game ever," he tells me with a playful roll of his eyes. I watch him split the deck and sink onto my knees on the rug, the low table separating us. He smiles and does the same before laying down his first card.

I go after, perfectly lining up my seven of diamonds with his five of clubs.

He puts a queen of clubs down and I reach over to neaten it. He looks up at me, his brow quirked, his lips twitching with a secret smile, but he doesn't ask me what I'm doing. He knows me well enough by now to know I'm not great with things being out of line.

I put my own card down again, it's a five of diamonds, then he puts his down and I notice how he purposely puts it at an angle. I try to resist, I really do try, but I quickly adjust it and then feel the curved corner of a card hit me on the head.

"Did you just…?"

"Yep," he replies, grinning from ear to ear. "Every time you do that, I'm going to throw something at you."

I gape at him, fighting the urge to laugh and cry. "But… I can't…"

"Live a little, let them be wonky." He pushes his card back to an angle.

I grit my teeth, fingers twitching, knees bouncing. Then I adjust it. I can't resist.

Another card hits my eyebrow and he holds his hands out, poise and ready to slide another at me.

"I told you I wouldn't be good at playing," I say, pouting at him.

"You're doing great. Keep going."

I narrow my eyes on him and throw my next card down. He laughs and another of his cards hits me on the face when I neaten the entire pile and make it perfectly parallel with all sides of the low table.

"Stoooooop," I whine, giggling and then I throw my own cards at him, the entirety of my hand.

He throws his at me too, laughing his ass off when I start picking them up and he keeps knocking them out of my hands.

"Leave them, let them be messy for a while," he instructs kindly, holding my hands together over the table. "Just talk to me. Ignore them."

Does he not know how torturous this is? Being covered in cards and surrounded by them too. It's torture.

"Tell me what your plans are for the weekend." He keeps my wrists together in a tight grip, giving me a gentle shake when I look around at the mess we created.

"I don't know…"

"Really? Rumor has it you're going on a date with Pax this weekend," he says warily and my heart stops. "Rumor has it you were caught making out with him like a teenager outside my office."

I open and close my mouth. "I… I mean… yeah, we're going out I guess."

"Drinks?" the stewardess asks politely, greeting us and smiling at the mess and the fact he still has my hands pinned between us.

"This isn't weird and like kinky or anything," I say to her, motioning to my bound hands. She stifles her smile as I continue, "I have OCD and he won't let me clean."

"Oh… shall I?"

"No," he cuts in, grinning at me smugly. "We're good. But please fetch us the whiskey. I could use a drink."

She nods happily and goes back the way she came.

I'm now less aware of the mess and more aware of the hands squeezing my wrists. Visions of him lifting them over my head and….

Nope. Not going there with that one. It has just been such a long time.

He breaks me out of my thoughts by asking cautiously, "Are you going to sleep with him?"

My eyes swing up to his and I almost choke on my words. "That's a really personal question."

“We’re both adults here, it’s just sex, we can talk about it.”

“You’re… you’re my boss,” I remind him, blinking like he’s crazy. “This is awkward.”

“Probably.” He doesn’t seem phased by anything I said. “I just want to warn you that he’s a dog. He has slept with more women than we have in the building.” He rubs my wrists softly with his thumbs and holds my gaze. “Just stay safe and guard your heart.”

I try to pull away but he holds tight. “Thank you for the advice but I’m not about to sleep with him on the first date…” That’s a lie, I might but he doesn’t need to know about that.

“Five-date rule?”

“No… oh my God. Do we have to talk about this?” I mutter, embarrassed.

“No, of course not, but I’m interested. I haven’t been on a date for years like you youngens.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re hardly old.”

“No, but I am married.” His ring shines in the orange glow of the interior lights.

A bottle of whiskey and two glass are brought over, both have ice in them. She pours us a finger’s worth in each, and Mr. C allows me use of my hands to actually take a sip. It’s great whiskey, it doesn’t burn my throat too harshly, but I still ask for lemon soda to mix it with. She brings me a cold can and I drain my drink all too quickly after adding that.

Mr. C pours me another and himself.

“What’s acceptable now?”

“Sorry?”

“I mean in the dating scene. What’s acceptable? How many dates before the big finale?”

I laugh through my nose and relish the warming feel of the whiskey as it enters my system. I drink some more before answering, “I don’t know, maybe three dates? I don’t date so this is all new territory for me too.”

“You’ve never dated?”

I shake my head. “I’ve dated, just not for a really long time. Since my freshman year of university.”

“You haven’t been on a date in five years? Has nobody asked?” He looks perplexed.

“People have asked but that date didn’t exactly go very well…” I sip more of my drink as my cheeks heat.

“Was he a jerk?”

“No, no… quite the opposite. He was lovely. Very kind and attentive.”

“But?”

I laugh nervously and drink more. He refills my glass and adds more soda. “It’s embarrassing.”

“I’m not judging.”

“Aren’t you?” I retort and he winces, feeling my dig. “Sorry. That was unnecessary.”

“Not at all, I’d say I deserved it.” He downs his second drink in one gulp and this time I pour him another. We share a smile. “So… tell me… what happened? Did you fart? Did you vomit on his shoes?”

“I wish.” I rub my eyes under my glasses with the tips of my fingers and let my head flop back onto the sofa. “Iblurtdownmber.”

“What?” he laughs, not catching my confession.

“I blurted out a number,” I cry, louder this time but he still looks confused. “When he finished, I said one hundred and fifty-three.”

“What?”

“It was my first time. I was nervous… so I counted, and I got up to a hundred and fifty-three and he thought I was… mocking him.”

He presses his lips together.

“It’s okay, you can laugh. I do. Every time I consider ever having sex again,” I groan and to his credit, he doesn’t laugh… not very loud anyway. “So, I don’t do sex.”

“Pax is probably going to expect sex eventually.”

“I know but… he’s more *skilled*, so I figured that when the time comes, I probably won’t have a head clear enough to count, and even if I do, there’s hope he’ll last longer than three minutes and won’t be offended when I shout out his number.”

He slaps his hand to his mouth, unable to contain it, and then he roars with laughter and I pick up the cards from the floor just so I can throw them at him again.

I can’t believe I told him that. I’ve only ever told Laurie that.

“You’re hilarious,” he says after a moment, finally calming himself. “And so adorable. You have no idea.”

“That’s an ego boost if I ever heard one, Ezra,” I retort, rolling my eyes and throwing more cards at him.

“See?” he asks, wagging his brows. “Was that so hard?”

“Calling you Ezra or ignoring the cards?”

“Both.” His arrogance as he sips his drink is comical and obviously in jest, but it still grates on me.

I glare at him, still twitching with the need to pick up the cards but surprised I forgot about them at all for a little while there. That’s not something I can ever say has happened before. “Don’t be smug. It makes you ugly.”

He spits his drink back into his glass and starts to choke while laughing.

“This is already the best trip we’ve ever had together.”

I start to pick up the cards, but he yanks them from my hand and hands me my drink instead.

“Leave them.”

“Until when?”

“Until you physically can’t cope anymore.”

I only last half an hour, but I’ve never been so proud of myself.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nine

He gives the best gifts. So thoughtful.

We ate dinner together last night and drank wine which didn't exactly mix well with the whiskey we'd already consumed. By eleven PM we were both swaying on the spot, laughing and joking like we did that night he showed up on my birthday. It was an amazing night and I worried for a moment that he'd go back to his old self again, but he hasn't.

This morning we ate breakfast together, both of us nursing hangovers. I asked him to never speak a word to anybody about the number thing and he promised he wouldn't but then he started asking me what number I reckon I'd say about random men in the restaurant. That was fun. He'd point and I'd reply with whatever number entered my mind. Some poor guy with a huge Afro got the number seven.

We headed to WhyTech, strolled around doing our jobs, speaking to people and taking a mountain of paperwork to get through. I knew it was going to be a long night the second I saw the mountain to be done.

Here we are at midnight after a super long day, sitting in his room on his huge bed, not an uncommon place for us to work from time to time. He's resting back against the headboard, legs crossed at the ankles, I'm sitting at the end of the bed cross-legged. Both hungry, both exhausted, both looking through receipt after receipt, adding up things to get the total for the year because something isn't quite right. I can see it's stressing Mr. C out, so I don't talk, I just work.

"There's definitely a lot of money missing that's unaccounted for," I whisper when we get to the end less than two hours later and he's scratching the shadow of stubble on his chin.

"This is…" He blows out a harsh breath. "FUCK!" He kicks the files off the bed, and they flutter around the room.

"Feel better?" I ask, yawning loudly.

He shakes his head as I move around the room, picking up the

scattered paper. I almost fall when a pillow hits me in the side of the head.

I look at him, glaring. “Are you for real?”

“What did I say?”

I throw the pillow back and sit back on the end of the bed. “You’re an ass.”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“I know,” I murmur, rubbing my eyes and lying back on the bed, almost forgetting this isn’t my room, it’s his. “What are you going to do?”

“Launch an investigation into the company branch. There’s nothing else I can do without going around and pointing fingers. This kind of money missing is a jail sentence.”

My stomach grumbles and then his responds. We share a laugh in this dire moment.

“Room service has finished for the night,” he comments, patting his stomach which has absolutely no fat on it whatsoever. I’ve heard he has a six-pack, but I’ve never seen it. I’ve never been interested enough to try. “Shall we see if we can order pizza?”

I shake my head. “I’m so tired. I just want to go to sleep.” My eyes drift close in agreement. “Sorry this didn’t have a happy ending.”

“What? You in my hotel room?” he jokes and my cheeks heat at the thought of me and him in his bed… Nope. Definitely not going there in my thoughts. “Kidding.”

“I know. I’m just too tired to laugh.” I sit up and rub my eyes, then sigh, stand, and stretch. “We should clean this up or I won’t be able to sleep.”

“You were about to sleep then just fine,” he comments wryly, and we start picking up the scattered papers.

“I wasn’t thinking about it then.”

“What were you thinking about?” he asks and my cheeks heat because I remember exactly what and who I was thinking about to forget the papers.

“The number six,” I lie and turn away from him.

“Me too,” he replies but there’s a tone to his voice which sends a chill down my spine.

I get the hell out of his room before I think of the number six anymore.

That was intense.

And I left all the papers scattered. Oh my God. What am I doing?

The investigation is launched and there’s little more we can do but

wait as his hired financial team from another branch make their way to Houston to figure out what has gone wrong. It's an expensive process and that's why he goes first usually. He has so many things to deal with, but then he is CEO so it's to be expected.

We head out after stopping for lunch as he speaks on the phone to Pax of all people. When he offers the phone to me, I shake my head rapidly, feeling panicked, and hide behind a street vendor.

He laughs and says something to Pax, then laughs again and moments later they end the call.

"Did you just hide from a phone call? You answer the phone all the time."

I shrug my shoulders. "I don't know what to say unless it's about the business or you."

"Tell him how you are, what you're doing, where we're going."

"I don't know what I'm doing or where we're going," I mumble, passing stores along the way. "Did you tell him I didn't want to talk to him?"

"I did," he admits, chuckling when my jaw hits the floor.

"Oh my God. Why would you tell him that?"

"Because he asked to speak with you."

"So make an excuse!"

"Like what?" He's finding all of this so amusing.

"Like… like I've been hit by a car or something."

His strong throat moves as he laughs, drawing the appraising eyes of those around us. They like what they see. Not me, but him. He's a tanned, dark-haired, Italian American with a sharp jaw and thick brows. Age has been kind to him.

I look like milk compared to him. My skin is so white, my hair dark brown with a reddish tint, like chocolate dipped in wine. I stand out like a ghost. Not like some of the exotic beauties I've seen pass us and give him the eye. It's almost embarrassing.

"What do you want to do?" he asks, something he has never asked me before.

"Find something to wear… I really need to. It's tomorrow night and he's basically seen my entire wardrobe at work." I peek up at Mr. C. "You don't have to come but I really do need to find an outfit."

That's my nice way of saying please leave me alone because normally he does. We don't do this. This isn't our thing. Usually I get to sightsee, and he stays at the hotel.

"Maybe I can help? Give you a man's eye?"

I raise a brow. "That's not happening, we all know what you think of my style."

"Yeah… I'm a dick." When I say nothing he scoffs a comical, "You're supposed to say, no, Ezra, you're not a dick, I forgive you."

“And deny you your truth? It’s not often people experience epiphanies, I’m not about to get in the way of that.”

He shoves me so hard I almost fall then grabs my hand to pull me in an attempt to stop my descent, but he yanks me so hard I come back like a yoyo and slam into his chest making him grunt and dig his heels in. The entire time he’s laughing, whereas I’m clinging to the front of his shirt feeling rattled.

I glare up at him. “You’re such an ass.”

“You’re so weightless. I almost threw you through that store window.”

“I know,” I grumble, still clinging to his shirt.

He looks down at me, his hands gripping just above my elbows and something warm and comforting transpires between us. Something that drowns out the rest of the world. People walk around us as our gaze holds and my vision narrows onto him and only him.

My eyes flicker to his lips as the steady beating of his heart against my knuckles lures me in, drawing me closer.

His smile fades and his hands squeeze tighter. He swallows and traces the lines of my face with gunmetal gray eyes, so sharp and heady.

I feel him dip his head a fraction, his eyes on my moistened lips as though they’re magnets to his.

“Move!” a jogger yells and I’m shoved into Mr. C so hard my cheek squishes against his chest.

“Hey,” I whine, turning around to look for the culprit but he’s already down the street flipping me the bird over his shoulder. “ASSHOLE!”

“Come on,” Mr. C mutters, guiding me away. “Let’s find you something to wear for your date.”

Whatever that was it’s broken now so I don’t have to think about it anymore. He seems content to ignore it too. I probably imagined it anyway. The connection… the chemistry… the electricity crackling in the space around us…

It was all in my head.

I’m tired and excited to hopefully get laid and end on a good number this time.

Now I’m nervous again. I don’t know how to do sex.

It terrifies me.

“What about this?”

If you had told me last week that I’d have been shopping with Mr. C in Houston, for a date with Pax, I would have laughed and laughed

and laughed.

"That's disgusting," I mutter, crinkling my nose up at it.

We've been doing this for an hour now and have been in three different stores. I've found nada and Mr. C keeps picking up clothes his wife would wear.

I finally find a couple of nice dresses which have long sleeves. I don't typically like showing my arms, not because they're hideous or disfigured but just because I don't like showing my arms. It's just a weird thing of mine.

One of the dresses I pick up is a dark purple velvet, it kind of reminds me of what those creepy porcelain dolls would wear.

Another is a dark red bodycon dress, a lot tighter than I've worn in a long time but I want to try it on for giggles.

I thank the sales lady and leave Mr. C to browse the men's section. This is not his kind of store but he's at least pretending it is, that makes me feel better. Credit to him for not moaning yet beyond calling me the most awkward woman he has ever met. Which must be saying something because I've met his wife.

"Hot date?" the sales lady asks, giving me a number to hook on the back of the door. Not that she'll forget how many clothes I took inside seeing as I have two dresses and nothing else.

"I guess so."

"Okay, well, try on your things in one of the rooms and if you walk further around to the left there's a bigger room with mirrors for all angles."

"Nifty."

I try on the porcelain doll dress first and I love it. It makes me look so white though, like snow. I look almost like a vampire.

Smiling, I exit the changing room and whistle at the sales lady to get her attention.

I'm about to ask her what she thinks but the widening of her eyes and the clearing of her throat tells me she does not like it.

Huffing, I turn back and rip it off by body for the bodycon dress, then I exit the changing room again a few minutes later and meet her smile of apology crossed with a grimace once more.

"Wait," she tells me, grabbing the purple dress off the hook in my room. "Can you… humor me for a minute? You have the exact same body shape as my sister and I'm looking for a birthday outfit for her." She's bullshitting… right? Is this allowed? "The Emilia Clark-type body… not that I'm hitting on you or anything." She holds up her hands, still rambling. "Can you try a dress on for me?"

I peek around her to look for Mr. C but he's nowhere to be found.

"Sure," I respond flatly. "I'll just change out of this."

Her hand sticks through the curtain while I stand naked in the

mirror.

"You've got to be kidding me," I hiss, poking my head around the curtain to look at her.

"It's gorgeous right?"

I groan and look at the soft red satin material. The breasts are held up by tiny straps that crisscross at the back.

"When in Rome," I mutter, "or Houston…"

I carefully slip the soft, light, red material over my head and it falls down my body like a waterfall of satin. The side against my body is soft like velvet but the outside is shiny and so simple. It clings to my breasts, holding them and hugging them before showing every groove of my flat stomach. I turn slightly impressed with how it gets to my butt and just falls over it almost fluid.

I've never shown this much of my body in my entire life. Not even when I had sex. I still had my top on and knee-high socks and I'm pretty sure we just yanked my panties to the side.

I feel feminine and sexy, but I don't feel like me.

"Let me see," she insists. "Are you decent?"

"Nope," I respond, pulling back the curtain and biting my lip. "I'm naked. I just look like I've been painted red… also this thigh split is way too high."

"You're a six, right?" she asks, suddenly crouching at my feet.

I nod and she helps me wriggle my pale feet into strappy red heels.

"I've never worn heels in my life. I'm going to fall," I warn her, and she takes my arm until I get used to them. My ankles wobble a bit but, overall, they aren't so bad. I can imagine they'll ache like hell in an hour though, thank heavens I'm only wearing them for a few minutes.

I stride ahead releasing my hair from its bun at her request. I think she might be attracted to me. I don't know but this whole thing is really fucking weird.

"Can I get changed now? You've seen it, surely, it's okay right? Just buy it for your sister. What's the big deal? If she doesn't like it then take it back." I'm rambling but I feel so uncomfortable right now.

I turn the corner to the part where the mirror room is, praying that it's empty though the lady assured me it is. The dress is tickling my ankles.

The second I step into the light, looking down so I don't fall, I hear somebody spray something from their mouth and start choking.

I look up… in my state of undress… and my eyes find Mr. C gaping at me, water dripping from his mouth, more water on the wooden floor.

I scream and grab for a nearby curtain, trying to wrap it around my body, still screaming.

“Holy shit what did I do?” the sales lady cries as I tangle myself in the curtain.

“GET OUT!” I yell at him but he seems to be stuck on the spot, still gaping at me as I try to hide myself from his view.

I pull off one of my heels and throw it at his head. He ducks at the last second and escapes the room, his tanned cheeks flushed and his eyes wide and down. As he leaves, he gives me one more look and I threaten to hit him with the other shoe.

“So… he *wasn’t* your boyfriend?” she asks, chewing on her lip.

“NO!” I cry, feeling on the verge of tears. “He was my boss.”

“Oh shit.”

“Did he tell you to get me to try that dress on?”

When she doesn’t reply I fight the urge to scream again. What the hell was he thinking? I stomp back to my room and almost rip the scrap of fabric that *he* tricked me into wearing when it gets stuck under my arms.

I get dressed at record speed and grumble my way out of there with flaming cheeks and my temper at near max. My sneakers hit the ground like bricks, and I don’t wait for him. He can get fucked. I am so angry.

I should have said no but I find it hard to say no to people.

“Rose,” he calls softly but I ignore him and continue. I know my way back to the hotel, so I don’t need him.

He doesn’t say my name again, but he does follow close behind not saying a word. I’m on the verge of tears again, angry embarrassed tears this time.

I don’t stop until we’re back at the hotel and he doesn’t speak until we’re in the elevator.

“Rose,” he tries again, and I flinch when he takes my pinky finger in his. “I am so sorry. I didn’t… I thought…”

“What? Hmm? What did you think?” I ask, looking at him over my shoulder with tears blurring my vision.

“I just wanted you to see yourself in something different,” he explains as the doors ping open.

“You think I don’t know what I look like in clothes like that?” I ask, sucking in a sharp breath as I rummage through my bag for the door key.

“It sounds stupid when you say it aloud but yes, I thought you were too nervous to try other styles because you’re so used to what you have.”

“Your stupidity is astounding,” I rumble, unlocking my door and pushing it open. He follows me inside without my permission. “What is your problem? Why do you always do this?”

“Do what?”

“Hurt me,” I reply, and he lurches back as though I’ve struck him. “You treat me like a toy… and I’m not a toy. What because I don’t dress like your wife, I’m not beautiful?”

“That’s not fair, that’s not why… I didn’t have any sexual motives to what I did. I didn’t realize you’d be so…”

“So what?” I ask, tying my thick wavy hair back. “Sexy?”

He looks away, shame crossing his features.

“Ezra, that’s the point,” I breathe, feeling disgusted with this entire situating. “I don’t want to *be* sexy. I don’t want to be the object of anybody’s desires but the man I choose. I wanted to be your equal, your partner, not the PA you’ve seen naked.”

“I haven’t seen you naked,” he corrects.

“You have, that dress was nothing but body paint and we both know it and I am humiliated.”

“I thought it might inspire an outfit for your date.”

“Because I couldn’t possibly get a man I want with how I like to dress?” I ask incredulously. “Because I couldn’t possibly know how to be sexy?”

He raises his hands and pushes one through his hair. “I was trying to help.”

“I didn’t ask for your help,” I snap and turn away from him. “You had no right to trick me like that.”

“I know.” He sounds defeated.

I shake my head and almost feel bad for chewing him out over this. Maybe he was trying to be helpful, maybe I am taking this too far, but then I think of Laurie, and what I’d tell her to do in my position.

“You should finish packing.”

He doesn’t move an inch, so I turn back to face him.

“Can I help you with anything else, Mr. Conti?”

“I’m sorry,” he tells me, directly to my eyes with so much heat and darkness swirling in those silver orbs. “Truly.”

The sincerity and depth to his apology has me almost trembling.

I felt it. I saw it. I could practically fucking taste it. His apology was genuine, but it didn’t feel like he was apologizing for what he did, but for something else entirely.

I just don’t know what.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Ten

He listens to me.

"You look stunning," Pax declares, his tone loud and charming as always. He twirls me under his arm and the skirt of my dress fans out. I ended up buying a new one this morning, it's navy blue and tight to my breasts, fanning out at my waist, and it has a matching cape jacket that I can drape over my shoulders to keep myself cloaked. "Ridiculously stunning. Can we cancel dinner so I can just eat you instead?"

I slap his arm. "Behave."

He laughs and leads me to his car, a sports car of course, some model of BMW. Absolutely stunning to say the least.

He opens the door for me and offers me his hand as I climb into the seat. It's no wonder he beds so many women if this is how he behaves all night.

When we're both buckled in and I'm clutching my purse to my stomach, he grins at me and holds my chin, then he leans over the console and places his lips gently over mine for a fraction of a second.

"Almost forgot to kiss you at the door," he whispers.

"Aren't you supposed to do that at the end of the night?"

He wags his eyebrows. "Thank you for the offer. I'd love to."

My head hits the headrest as I laugh so hard I almost cry. I check my eyes in the mirror to make sure my mascara hasn't run down my cheeks.

"What are we doing?" I ask quietly when he drives for a while to a part of the city that I don't know very well.

"You'll see."

We end up at a tiny little Mexican restaurant which, ominously enough, is situated at the end of a long, narrow alleyway. We head up a set of stone steps and end up on a beautiful terrace with dangling lights and candles on every table. The roof is sheet plastic so the sun pours through it but not the rain on a dreary day.

According to Pax, who seems to know the owners, they do the best enchiladas in town so that's what I order.

“How are you with spicy?” Pax asks, sipping his drink that was brought to us a few minutes ago. I’m just having a soda. I need a clear head.

I tap my fingers on the table as I answer, “Average. I like spicy foods.”

“Me too,” he watches me tap my fingers and mirrors the movement. “You do that a lot.”

“Sorry.” I do it twice more to make forty-two and stop.

“Don’t be sorry, it doesn’t bother me. It’s cute. I like all of your little… habits.”

I wet my lips, feeling warmer all of a sudden. “Not many people would say the same.”

“People are too uptight, they let things bother them which really have no effect on their lives at all.”

“That’s actually really true.” I grin at him, seeing him in a brighter light than before.

“Does it annoy Conti? Because, if so, you can always come and work for me?”

“And then we’d never be able to do this again.”

“Smart girl, not mixing business with pleasure. I usually follow the same rule, but for you, I had to make the exception.” He raises his glass and I clink mine against it.

“It doesn’t really count; different departments and we only see each other when you use the wrong elevators or go to see Mr. C.”

Mr. C. Mr. C. Mr. C.

STOP.

I go back to tapping my fingers to stop myself from saying his name six times.

“Are you nervous?” Pax asks, still smiling.

I shake my head. “Not nervous. Just…” I stop my tapping and laugh awkwardly. “I’m so nervous. I have had a huge crush on you for the *looongest* time so this feels like a Carrie moment to me. As in the horror movie. Not Sex in the City… although that’s cool too.” I can’t believe I just said that.

I take a really large gulp of my drink as he laughs into his.

“You don’t believe this is real?” he asks, looking excited. “How can I prove it to you?”

“You can’t. Only time will tell, I guess.”

He waves for a waiter to get us refills of our drinks and taps his foot against mine under the small round wrought iron table.

We chat, eat, banter, laugh, and the entire time, all I can think of is what number he’s going to be. I really hope he’s in the thousands.

He even gets me dancing, not something I do much of but with him leading I can’t mess up. Though I do stand on his feet a couple of

times; he just laughs and takes the blame. It's the most fun I've had in ages and already I can't wait to tell Laurie about it.

We're both panting by the end of the third song and time is slipping by us both.

He grabs me, one hand at my waist and the other at my neck and his lips touch mine. He deepens it like he did in the office and I wish he had another wall to push me up against.

My body is aching with desire by the time he pulls away and I know my lips are swollen. He smiles down at me, calls me cute and looks at the time again.

"Your apartment or mine?" he asks, his voice a whisper against my lips.

"Mine," I reply, holding his eyes so he knows that yes, I'm going to be a hussy and invite him up.

I should wait a few dates but I'm excited. It has been five years. I don't even care if he never calls me again. Okay, I do…

I should really speak to him about this.

We drive home in silence, my leg is bouncing, his hand is on the bouncing leg, it's sliding higher and higher. I can't look at him, especially not when he slides my skirt all the way up and gently strokes me over the satin of my thong. I wore nice underwear today but I'm already drenched through.

I moan as he rolls his finger over my sensitive clit that has been throbbing since that kiss on the dance floor. My legs twitch and I stop my bouncing only so I can tense and control my whimpering.

I'm going to come if he keeps doing what he's doing. It feels so good.

He removes his hand to control the car and mutters a curse under his breath. We still haven't said a word to each other. There's only one thing left to say, and it can't be said with words, only penis and vagina.

I get my front door open with shaking hands and step inside.

"Pax, meet apartment. Apartment, meet Pax," I jest, still shaking with nerves. I need to get a grip.

I kick off my shoes and place them neatly by the door, he does the same and removes his jacket as I hang up mine.

When I turn and look at him, I eye him desperately. God, I want him so bad it hurts my body.

"You look hungry again," he comments, his lips set in a smirk. Gripping the front of my dress, he yanks me towards him and starts removing the pins from my hair. "I can help you with that."

My soft bun releases and my hair falls in one thick spiral over my shoulder. It's still slightly damp from my shower that I had before he

came to get me, and the honey scent of my shampoo wafts between us. He buries his face in my neck and inhales deeply.

"Sweet," he murmurs, bends and then lifts my legs so they're wrapped around his waist.

I squeak, startled by it because I wasn't expecting it.

"Can I get you a drink or anything?" I ask against his mouth because he's kissing me as he walks me through my apartment. "I have water, wine, whiskey, soda. But it's not the good soda." His lips trail down my neck and I swear my vagina does a backflip of joy. "I get it in for Laurie because she has a sweet tooth… not realizing soon she'll have no teeth if she keeps drinking that stuff. You have really nice teeth."

We find my bed and he lowers me onto it, kissing me desperately, likely to shut me up.

When I reach for the bottom of his white T-shirt, he yanks it off in one swift move and tosses it onto the floor somewhere. I almost bolt for it but I stop myself and click my fingers six times.

I sit up so he can unzip my dress and then I stop him when he reaches for the skirt.

"What's wrong?" he asks gently. "Too fast?"

"No… it's not… it's just…" I lie back and cover my face with my hands. "I'm terrified I'm going to do this all wrong and you're going to go around the office tomorrow and tell everybody how bad I am."

Laughing, he crawls up my body, hitching my legs up either side of his hips one at a time so his swollen manhood is pressing directly against my swollen womanhood. I'm using weird words now. I can't help it.

He kisses me again and just hovers above me, looking down at me while his thumb dances over my cheek. "Are you a virgin?"

"No, I did sex once."

"Just once?"

I nod. "Five years ago."

"It was bad?"

"It was awful, it lasted one hundred and fifty-three seconds and it was painful and messy and…" I trail off, checking his face for any reaction but he doesn't give me one. "Are you put off?"

"Not in the slightest, I'm just thinking of all of the creative ways I can make you come before I do." His smug grin is endearing, and my body relaxes beneath him. "Can I see you naked now?"

Nodding rapidly, I sit up and then stand and close my eyes when he peels my dress over my head and drops it on the floor with his shirt.

I immediately cover my body with my hands, feeling my cheeks heat as he drops his pants and boxers, freeing his angry-looking

erection. But sexy angry, not bad angry.

"You have a really nice penis," I tell him, and he makes it twitch.

Pulling my hands away he steps back, and we just look at each other, though he's way more comfortable with this than I am.

My nipples are hard from the chill and the excitement, my stomach muscles are clenched because I'm too terrified to relax. I'm probably visibly trembling.

"You're incredibly sexy," he tells me sounding awed as he rubbers up. "Why do you hide such beauty from the world?" Before I can reply, he squeezes my breasts with his hands and finishes, "Actually, keep hiding it. I don't want anybody to see all of this but me."

I gasp when he takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks.

So that's what that feels like.

We lie on the bed together with a bit of coaxing from him and I relax into the pillow, covering my face with my hands as he feasts on me like nobody ever has. He kisses every inch of my body, worships ever centimeter, and licks and sucks my clit until I'm a screaming mess, grabbing his hair as my orgasm tears through me.

"Three hundred and nine," I cry out with it, breathing heavily and writhing as pure bliss starts in my womb and spirals outwards.

He looks up, his lips glossy from my juices, and questions me with his eyes.

"I'll tell you later," I reply, and he laughs before continuing his thing down there. He gets me off the same way again at four hundred and ninety-eight and then finally he sinks inside of me with a growl of his own.

It aches, of course it does, it's an unused organ down there, I'm surprised there aren't any cobwebs.

"Fuck, you feel incredible," he breathes, thrusting against me, pulling out and in just enough to create friction against my already thoroughly used clit. Not that she cares, she's ready to come again, she just needs him to go a bit faster and harder.

My clit is now a person.

He stops suddenly, his eyes clenched shut.

"Are you okay?" I ask, trailing my fingers up and down his spine.

"Yep, just need a moment." He presses his lips to mine and kisses me softly. "You are so fucking tight… the last guy didn't stand a chance, hell, even I'm struggling to control myself."

His words are probably lies, but I appreciate them all the same.

I shove his chest, forcing him to lie on his back, then I climb on top and guide him inside again.

"I've always wanted to do this," I say to him, rotating my hips after forcing him to hold them. "It looks so sexy on TV." I arch my back and bounce gently up and down.

He bites on the side of his hand, groaning as I move. This is good. I like this. I love seeing his reactions though I'm not sure I'm going to come this way.

He sits up, bringing our chests together and holds me tight around the back.

"FUUUUUCK!" he yells and I feel him pulse inside of me with his orgasm.

I want to not say anything. I really want to not say it. I kiss his neck, hoping that it takes my mind off it enough to not say it.

It's not to be.

I'm a lost cause.

"Seven hundred and sixteen," I whisper and his eyes ping open.

"Are you timing me?"

"Not on purpose."

He laughs and pulls my body onto his so I'm draped over his bare chest. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

I smile at him, glad he's not offended but I don't see why he should be, it might not have lasted hours but it was amazing.

"They were the best orgasms I've ever had," I confess, kissing his chest.

"Oh fuck yeah," he agrees. "Give me five and we'll go again."

"Okay," I say, climbing out of bed and gathering our clothes.

He sits up, gloriously naked, still semi-hard and still smiling. "What are you doing?"

"Hanging up our clothes."

"Why?"

"Because…"

"Because?"

"I do a lot of things I have to do but can't explain why." I pop his pants and shirt onto the same hanger and stick his boxers into his pocket. Then I toss my dress into the laundry hamper and look around, satisfied that I didn't miss anything.

"Come back to bed," he pleads, patting the space beside him.

I claim it and curl into his side. He's so warm and cozy. I like this. I didn't think I would, but I do.

"Are you ready to go again yet?" I ask and his smile returns. "Because I need to have six orgasms."

"Six?"

I nod, pressing my lips together so I don't laugh. I don't actually need six, but I really want more of what we just did before my courage hides away. "If that's okay?"

"I like a challenge."

He conquers it too, getting me to orgasm six before finally, we sleep.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eleven

He's handsome.

I wake up to an empty bed and sigh. I was expecting it; I didn't think he'd stay but the way he held me in his arms all night I kind of hoped he would.

My phone rings and I wonder if it might be him, so I roll over and look at it, sitting up as naked as the day I was born.

"Mr. C?" I ask around a yawn, putting the phone on speaker and placing it on my desk.

"Can you come into the office? I need you for some things."

I rub my tired eyes and cringe when I see the mascara on them. "Ugh."

"You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm just waking up."

"You're not up already?" he asks, and I put the phone back to my ear while scrubbing at my face with a makeup remover wet wipe.

"Apparently not," I grumble, looking at myself in the mirror as I scrub my face clean.

I shriek a shrill noise when I see somebody standing in my bedroom doorway, leaning against the jamb with hungry eyes on my naked body.

"Did I scare you?" Pax asks, wearing only his boxers and T-shirt.

"Yes," I reply, pressing my hand to my chest to calm my racing heart. "I thought you'd gone."

"And miss round four, not a chance." He presses his body to mine and lifts me like he did when we entered my apartment last night. My butt rests on the vanity table, it's cold.

He bites my lip and starts to kiss me. I lose myself. Forgetting about my phone for a moment.

"MY PHONE!" I yell, bringing it back to my ear as Pax laughs silently. He knew exactly what he was doing. "Mr. Conti, are you still there?"

"Still here," he replies, sounding strained.

"Are you desperate? Because if you're desperate I'll come."

“You certainly will,” Pax murmurs, biting on my ear.

“Will you stop?” I snarl at him but I can’t stifle my smile. I love how attentive he is.

He kisses down to my chest and sucks my nipple into his mouth. I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from whimpering.

“Desperate, definitely desperate,” Conti replies. “I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

Groaning, because he’s sinking into me, our hips at the perfect height for sex, I tell my boss, “I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Try to be quicker.”

I disconnect the call and wrap my arms around Pax’s neck.

He’s so good at this.

A while later we collapse on my bed side by side, both sweaty and panting.

“How’d I do?” he asks, breathlessly.

“Nine hundred and twenty-two,” I respond and check my watch. “I need to get ready for work.”

“I was hoping we’d spend the day together,” he mutters, pouting.

Boldly, I straddle him and press my lips to his. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Good,” he slaps my ass and watches as I head out of my bedroom, still butt naked.

The way he praises my body constantly makes me feel beautiful and not self-conscious at all. All he did all night was whisper words of praise and call me sexy and a goddess… it was amazing.

Better than I ever could have expected.

“I wish I’d saved my first time for you,” I tell Pax when he climbs into the shower with me.

“We’ll just pretend that your first time never happened,” he responds proudly. “I gave you your first penetrative orgasm. I want it on a certificate so I can display it in my office.”

“If you ever put that on display, I will put your penis on display beside it.”

He laughs like I’m hilarious, little does he know how serious I’m being.

I stumble into the office feeling sore, frazzled, but very happy, and smile at Mr. C the moment I clock him with my eyes behind his desk.

“Morning,” I cry cheerily, and he raises his brows at me. “What do you need me to do?”

He motions for me to sit and slides a manila envelope my way when I do, dumping my bag on the floor beside me.

“What’s this?” I question, opening the folder and pulling out the stack of papers within.

“It’s a massive clusterfuck of a situation is what it is.” He motions for me to slide my chair around to his side, but I nod to the sofa instead. He has a modern leather sofa by the window, in front of a black, wooden coffee table. It’s where he naps usually though I don’t know how because it’s not the comfiest seat in the world.

We move to the table; I sit on the floor as he spreads out the papers and he sits beside me.

He explains the situation, asking me to highlight certain spends, dates, and locations of product. It’s not difficult but it is repetitive and tiresome. It reminds me of when we worked together in his hotel room, the night we both thought about the number six.

After a few hours, Wayne, the errand boy, brings us lunch and I’m happy when the sandwich I ordered is exactly how I wanted it. Though I did write it down for him to pass to them twice.

As we eat, my phone vibrates.

It’s Pax. I can’t stifle my stupid grin.

Pax: Are you free tonight?

Rose: You’re not tired after last night?

Pax: Nope. Are you?

Rose: I might sleep for a year.

Pax: I have a really big, comfy bed at my place… just saying.

Rose: I have work tomorrow.

Pax: Wow. Coincidence. Me too.

Pax: So… my place after work?

Pax: Pack an overnight bag.

Rose: I didn’t say yes.

Pax: You’re going to and we both know it. I’m very persuasive. I’ll even make you cum 6 times again.

Rose: I don’t think I can physically handle 6 more… but we could do something else?

Pax: Whatever you want, baby. Just be here.

I put my phone down on the table and glance at Mr. C who is glaring at my phone like he wants it to burst into flames.

"It's my lunch break," I say, shaking my sandwich at him and his eyes come to mine. "You can't be mad at me for texting on my lunch break."

"I'm not mad," he answers, blinking rapidly to clear his head and then smiling.

"You were glaring at my phone."

He chuckles nervously. "No, I was just lost in thought and your phone happened to be in my line of sight." He rests back bending his leg at the knee. "Are you coming to the staff Halloween party?"

"Hell yeah, I'm bringing Laurie. I love Halloween."

"What costume are you wearing?"

I tap my nose and take another large bite of this delicious sandwich. I'll be sad when it's all gone. I am starving. Who would have thought all that sex would work up such an epic appetite?

"What are you wearing?"

He scoffs playfully. "You think I'm telling you mine if you won't tell me yours?"

"Fair play." I grin, nudging his shoulder with mine.

"So… how was your date?"

My cheeks heat, likely glowing red and I can't stop the smile on my face.

"That good, huh?" he mutters, placing his empty sandwich bag on the table and wiping his hands on a napkin.

"Amazing," I respond genuinely, grinning at him like the Cheshire cat. He can probably see all of my teeth so I try to tone it down. "Pax is——"

"A massive player," he states, matter of fact, and my spine stiffens. "Be careful with him. He'll take what he wants and then drop you. He does it all the time."

I gape at him, feeling my temper breach the surface of my calm. "You have no right to say that."

"I'm your friend," he implores, placing his hand on mine. "I have every right to say that."

I shrug my shoulders. "That may be so but for all you know he's changed. I could be different."

He snorts and my temper further breaches the surface.

"Did you just snort at me?"

"You sound naïve and it's going to get you hurt." His hand that's still on mine squeezes comfortingly. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

I want to be angry with him for prying but there's genuine concern

in his eyes and it makes my temper slink back to the cave it likes to hide in. “I’ll be careful.”

“That’s all I ask.”

We fall silent for a moment, both of us staring at the files we have to sort through. Such boring work.

Then, with a wicked grin he asks, “So… what was his number?”

I let my head fall back and return his devilish smile. “Which time?”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twelve

The tone of his voice.

It has been twelve days since my date with Pax. Twelve amazing, sex-full, incredibly hot days, except for the days I had to travel with Mr. Conti which was an amazing time all on its own. So technically ten days of sex. It's as though we can't get enough of each other which makes sense for me because I was basically a virgin when we first started and he's incredible in bed.

He is so attentive, loving, cuddly, a little bit clingy but I kind of like it. He doesn't make a mess and he tidies up any mess he does make, he even hangs up his clothes as he removes them so I don't stress about it.

I know Mr. C told me to be careful but how do I guard my heart from somebody so fucking amazing?

Pax: Come to my office.

Rose: I'm working.

Pax: I want your lips around my cock. It's all I can think about.

I love it when he talks dirty to me. It's tame in comparison to how most people talk dirty but like I said, this is all new to me.

"Morning, Mrs. Conti." I smile as she exits the elevator.

"Good morning, Rose," she returns happily and places a cream envelope on my desk. She always looks so gorgeous and glamorous, with her long blonde hair, perfectly straight to her shoulders, her perfect-looking skin and glowing brown eyes. Her clothes are designer, always. I've never seen her wearing anything from Walmart let's put it that way. "It's an invitation to our annual Christmas ball."

"A work thing?"

"Oh no, dear, not for work, it's optional."

"Oh, wow." I pick up the envelope, surprised I got an invitation at

all. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” she replies, giving me another genuine smile before entering her office to speak to her husband.

Since what she and her husband said about me, she has tried to apologize numerous times. I don’t know if she felt guilty, or just worried I’d stop taking Maria to her extra-curriculars. I swear these days I have her daughter more than she does. Not that I mind. I adore Maria and she adores me. We have a lot of fun together. Tuesdays are our days, though recently I’ve been filling in a lot of gaps.

This also means I’ve been spending more time with Mr. C because he tends to show up to soccer and then sticks around and Maria makes me stay. When he said twelve days ago that we are friends, I didn’t put much thought into it but I suppose he’s right. I spend more time with him than anyone, and when we’re not working, he’s either throwing things at me when I’m organizing his office, or we’re laughing our asses off together.

We have a great time. I didn’t realize how much I was starting to enjoy my job and that’s not all because of Pax.

I add the date of the party to my calendar and wonder what to wear. I’m going to have to buy yet another outfit.

Le sigh.

“Mr. Conti, I’m just stepping away from my desk for a moment,” I say into the speaker.

“No problem,” he replies, though it sounds strained.

I bet they’re having sex. They usually do when she visits, which isn’t often.

I head to Pax’s office, giving Julia a smug grin as I pass. She knows we’re seeing each other; she’s caught us making out like school kids twice and she is really jealous. She wants him and that makes me feel a bit nervous, though I’m going to be smug about it for the time being.

“Think we can do a three hundred?” Pax asks the moment I open the door and close it behind me.

He draws the blinds over the glass windows that face Mr. Conti’s offices. All the offices are mostly glass but nobody ever opens their privacy blinds so they may as well have built them with brick.

I smile against his mouth, my back against the door as he pulls up my skirt, wraps my leg around his hip and thrusts inside. His cock encased in a ribbed rubber that feels incredible when I clench around it.

“That’s it,” he whispers in my ear, licking at the lobe as his hands grip my ass.

I cling on to his neck for dear life, hoping he stays this addicted to me forever.

The burning starts when I put my hand between us and tweak my

clit. If we only have three hundred seconds, I want to make sure I come in time.

Mr. Conti will be mad if I leave him for more than that and Pax won't let me go until I finish. There's no faking it with him.

Although Mr. Conti is probably doing this exact thing with his wife right now, so maybe I do have a bit more time.

"You're fucking gorgeous. Your pussy… so tight," he grits, whispering in my ear.

I'm so close. So so very close. My head falls back, thudding against the door.

I can hardly breathe.

"Almost there, you've gotta get there with me," he hisses, pressing his forehead to mine, his moans getting louder and his breathing more erratic.

The door pushes against my back.

We forgot to lock it!

I squeak and we both push it back, so it clicks shut.

"I'm busy," Pax barks and I giggle into his neck.

"So am I," Mr. Conti barks and to say we separate quickly is an understatement.

"Fuck," Pax panics, fumbling with his trousers and belt as I yank down my skirt and try to fix my face without a mirror.

We must look a mess. Pax's hair is wild, his lips are swollen, his cheeks flushed. I'm visibly trembling. I was so close to orgasm that if I just press my clit like a button I will pop like a balloon.

Pax grins at me and then opens the door as I browse his bookshelf casually.

"You," Mr. Conti barks, pointing at me. "Back to your desk."

"Yes, sir," I mutter, stifling my grin as I duck past him.

Pax pats my butt as I go, so I give him a wide-eyed, "*what the hell?"* look.

"Pax," Conti snaps and I shut the door behind me, giving another smug grin to Julia as I pass her.

When I return to my desk, Mrs. Conti is nowhere to be found.

I get back on with my work and wait for Mr. C to return. It takes a few minutes and I hear yelling, but he comes back and completely ignores me before slamming his office door shut.

Rose: What happened?

Pax: I just received my first disciplinary.

Rose: For what?

Pax: For having sex at work. So worth it though. Want to come back and finish?

Rose: Not funny, Pax. What really happened?

Pax: I'm serious. Somebody complained that they could hear us.

Rose: Who?

Pax: Probably Julia.

Rose: Maybe. She totally wants you. She always glares at me.

Pax: I wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot barge pole, baby, you've got nothing to worry about.

Rose: I'm not worried, if I was worried, I'd never have told you.

Pax: Fair point.

Rose: See you tomorrow then? I don't have any more breaks today.

Pax: See you tonight. I want to finish what we started.

Rose: I can't tonight, I'm hanging out with Laurie.

Pax: Oh I fucking adore her. She's hilarious.

I'm glad he likes Laurie, he met her last week when I forgot she was visiting and Pax was in my kitchen, naked, cooking us breakfast, an apron tied around his front to stop any grease from burning his delectable chest. I've never seen Laurie drool so much over a guy before. It made my chest swell with pride. *I pulled that. I sleep with that man.*

I wonder if that's how Mrs. Conti feels about Mr. Conti? She'd be an idiot if she didn't.

Not that I think he's insanely attractive or anything.

I mean, he is, I'd be blind if I missed it. But I don't find him *attractive*, I just think he's very nice to look at. He's also an amazing dad and a great husband from what I've seen.

Rose: I'd invite you but I need girl time.

Pax: :'-(

Rose: Stop it. Get back to work.

Pax: Speaking of work. Did Conti give you a disciplinary too?

Rose: Not yet. I guess we'll see.

It takes him an hour before he buzzes me through, and when I enter, he doesn't say a word about what happened, he smiles at me and we get on with the job.

What the hell?

While he talks and I listen, I pull the pins from my hair and let my bun fall. It's a mess anyway after what happened in Pax's office.

I move to the mirror and fluff it out, running my fingers through it so I can put it back into a bun again.

Conti stops mid-sentence, cutting off his speech on how solar energy is the way forward and blah blah. I always listen to his pitches and then we work on them together to make them the best they can be.

I meet his eyes in the mirror, a bobby pin between my lips.

"You should leave it down more often," he says softly, his eyes roaming my face. "It really suits you."

The bobby pin falls from my lips and to the floor, but I can't take my eyes off his.

He stands and prowls towards me. I'm frozen in place like a deer in headlights. My heart is racing.

Bending, he picks up the pin and takes my hair from my hands. His rough fingers drag across my scalp and my eyes flutter shut. An intense feeling of butterflies in my stomach makes me feel close to orgasm again. I almost beg him to stop because this isn't right. This doesn't feel friendly. It feels *too* friendly.

His hands work through my hair, pulling it and parting it, twisting it and manipulating it.

I whimper, deciding that I like my hair being played with more than anything else.

"Done," he whispers, dropping my new braid over my shoulder.

I grin at him, the sexually charged moment flittering away. "You've been practicing."

"I have," he tells me, looking proud of himself. "Maria demands so many crazy hairstyles these days."

I admire my tight braid while tapping the two bobby pins that hold the end six times. “This is excellent, Mr. Conti.”

“Ezra,” he corrects, annoyed. “Why is it you have called Pax by his first name since you met but you’re always so formal with me?”

“I don’t work for Pax,” I mutter, sitting back in the seat across from him. “I work for you. It’s appropriate. Besides, I call you Ezra out of work hours when we’re hanging with Maria.”

He changes the subject. “She adores you. You’re all she speaks about these days.”

“I adore her too. She’s the main reason I might never quit this job,” I jest.

His eyes heated and wary hold mine. He hesitates and the gray of his iris seems to shine as his pupils expand. “Is she the only reason?”

“You’re trying to make me stroke your ego,” I jest, grinning at him, he watches me expectantly. “I guess you’re alright too, Ezra.”

Smiling, he picks up the paper he was reading from before and continues. Well… he continues until his office door opens and Pax appears. His eyes scan the room before landing on us and a look of relief calms his face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask and he looks at a loss for what to say.

“Mr. Conti,” he says clearly. “Do you have a copy of the Clandestine file?”

Mr. C nods. “I’ll deliver it to Julia as soon as I find it.”

“Thank you.”

“Be more careful with your things, Pax.” Conti’s tone is dark and heavy. “Some things are irreplaceable.”

Pax’s jaw ticks and his smile is forced as he turns and leaves, leaving the door open in his wake.

I stand and close it, then return to Mr. C. “What was that all about?”

“He lost an important file, that’s all,” he lies and continues reading.

Was Pax checking up on us? What transpired between him and Ezra in his office to make Pax react this way?

I don’t like this. Not at all. It reeks of drama I want no part of.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirteen

Even when he's angry.

Normal people go to Halloween parties dressed as witches and mermaids and fairies… normal paranormally type things.

Not I.

No. I like to be the odd one out. Where most women dress sexy, I dress funny.

Last year I was Scooby Doo and Laurie was Shaggy.

The year before I was SpongeBob, and Laurie was Patrick.

This year however, I am wearing an inflatable T-Rex costume and Laurie is a dying cow, aka my dinner.

We giggle like little girls all the way into the building after I donned my outfit behind the taxi that dropped us off.

It took a couple of minutes, but it inflated, and I just know I'm going to melt inside this suit.

Still. I look hilarious.

Laurie being Laurie walks into the building mooing. I chase her with my little arms extended and my massive dinosaur head bobbing around.

She presses the button on the elevator twelve times in rapid succession and I jig a little while I wait.

I love dressing up, it makes me feel like I've got a shield in front of me. I can't get embarrassed or be ridiculed because nobody can see me.

The elevator rises with just us two in it.

The party is being held in the cafeteria on our level, it's big enough for everyone and they've hired a bar too which should be fun. Although Laurie and I already got drunk at home to gather the courage to come to this thing.

Laurie's tics get quite animated when she's had a drink. I love it, but other people might not.

"Daniel McIntyre is my mom's lover," she says and her black eye twitches.

I pat her soft cow head. "You wish."

“I wish for penis up my butthole.”

I almost fall backwards with laughter at that one. She sighs but smiles too.

“I’m nervous,” she tells me.

“Don’t be,” I whisper, but truth be told, I’m nervous too. I’m also very drunk so I also don’t care.

The elevator dings to a stop and the doors open.

Everybody looks at us.

Literally… the entire hall full of people just stop and look.

At least everybody is dressed but nobody looks as awesome as we do.

“Candy cane vagina pads,” Laurie cries and slaps a hand over her mouth.

“Who is that?” Julia asks, referring to me as others say, “Awesome costume, man.”

They don’t know it’s me.

This is hilarious.

I toddle on, my big dinosaur butt and tail swaying as I go.

People laugh and cheer as we go past and I’m finding it hard to see because the plastic screen of the costume is starting to fog. I forgot to spray it with deodorant. Damn.

“What are we having?” Laurie asks as we rush through the crowded cafeteria to the makeshift bar.

“A double whiskey, plenty of ice,” I reply and she orders for us both as somebody cups their hands on the plastic and peers in to see who it is.

“I knew it was you,” Pax says and doubles over with laughter. He presses his lips to the plastic but I step back and bop him on the head with my big dinosaur mouth. People around us laugh and cheer, figuring out that it’s me if Pax is kissing me. It’s no secret anymore that we’re dating.

He’s dressed as James Bond… adventurous… not. He just couldn’t be bothered to go shopping for a costume.

“Is that actually Rose?” Mr. C asks and I turn to wave at him.

My jaw hits the floor when I see him.

He’s dressed as a priest. A fucking priest. A shirtless priest with a white collar and black cape draped over his shoulders.

His chest and abs are… whoa. He’s smooth, toned, with deep grooves and that special V that goes down to his…

I swallow hard and avert my eyes.

Oh man… I’ve always had a thing for priests. It’s the whole chastity-until-death thing. Like all that pent-up sexual frustration and I get to be the one who relieves it. But only hot priests… if they exist.

This one exists. He looks… I daren’t comment further.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” I joke when he comes closer to see me through the plastic.

He flashes me a smile. “You like?”

Pax watches me intensely; he can’t see my face, but he can hear my reply. What’s his deal? He’s really staring at me in a not-so-nice way.

“You look heavenly,” I jest, and he laughs. Pax, however, drinks his drink and looks away.

Laurie turns with the drinks to our little group, a straw in mine. She holds it while I make a little hole in the top of the zip and suck half the whiskey in a few healthy gulps. It goes down so nicely. So cooling and refreshing, until the warming afterburn, that is.

“Holy Father, fuck me,” Laurie cries, her eyes roaming up and down my boss. I feel a spike of something at her perusal of him, something not so nice. I don’t know what the feeling is but it’s making me edgy. “You are one fine piece of man candy, Mr. C.”

I flap my T-rex hand in her face.

“Why thank you,” he replies, grinning at her in a really seductive way.

It’s stupid, I know he’d never cheat on his wife, but I don’t like that she has his attention and I don’t. An unfair thing of me seeing as I’m here with Pax.

“More, please,” I tell Laurie who guides the straw through the hole. I decide to just trap the straw in place and dip it into the glass instead whenever I need it.

I’m smart sometimes.

“You look hilarious, as I knew you would,” Mr. C says to me, knocking his knuckles against the plastic cover.

“Where’s Mrs. Conti?” I ask him, looking around for her by turning my whole body.

“She just left,” he replies. “She came as a nun.”

“Sexy.” I laugh at the image of Mrs. Conti as a nun, wishing I hadn’t gotten here so late, but the idea was to get here when everybody is drunk already. I think we succeeded. Everybody looks to be having a great time.

“Let’s dance,” Laurie pleads, looking at the dance floor and one of my male coworkers who has been eyeing her since she arrived. I think they’ve met before, once when she brought me lunch and he thought her tics were hilarious.

“Excuse me, gents,” I tell Pax and Mr. C. “I have to dino-dance.”

“Oh this will be good,” Ezra mutters and Pax hums his agreement.

We find a space where people are already boogying and join in. There’s little I can do but shake my T-rex butt and wave my hands around. Nobody can see me dancing beyond the outside of my

costume anyway. So that's what I do, I hold hands with Laurie and shake my head and dino-butt. The laughter we get is excellent and it's even better when people join in, making me dance with them and take pictures.

Three drinks and a lot of songs later, I stumble out of there, leaving Laurie with Pax on the crowded floor.

I can't breathe. I'm so warm. Sweat is dripping down my body. It's gross but at least I don't smell bad.

I pull on the community bathroom door but it's locked. Fuck.

I really need out of this suit for ten. I'm going to pass out.

Meh… Ezra won't mind if I use his en suite. I hope.

I drag my feet to his office and push on the door, surprised to find it unlocked. Lucky me.

It's pitch-black, the only light coming through is the occasional disco light dancing across the outside of the blinds.

"Can't breathe," I say and break out of my costume. The cool air hits my clammy skin and I want to cry.

I drunkenly kick my feet out of it, tripping and catching myself on the desk, and then I head towards the bathroom and do my thing. The light blinds me momentarily upon entry.

I wash my hands and face and splash water at myself, but I still feel gross. I decide to just take one of Mr. C's flannels and wipe down my entire body with cold water. I pull off my thin dress and drop it on the closed toilet, leaving me in matching lace bra and thong. I put them on because I figured I'd be getting laid tonight and matching underwear sends Pax wild.

My neck, shoulders, chest, stomach all tingle and quiver as I wipe myself down. I moan. It feels so good. So cold.

When done, I let my body air dry and then put back on my white cotton chemise, feeling a lot cooler now. The flannel lands in the trash can by the toilet with a thud.

I almost don't want to put the suit back on, but I can't go out there in this.

The bathroom door closes behind me as I smooth down my dress one final time. It only comes to just past my rear. I was thinking of going in nothing but my underwear but convinced myself that would be a bad idea. Especially if the suit got ripped.

I drunkenly head forward despite the fact I'm not paying attention and collide with a bare chest.

"Dude," I mutter stupidly staring at somebody's throat in the dark. But then I make out the collar and realize the chest under my hands is solid and so perfectly toned and smooth. "Hello, Father." I giggle drunkenly and he smiles in the dark, his teeth flashing as his hands touch my waist, holding me in place. "Do you want to confess?"

A whisper of his whiskey, sweet-scented breath fans across my face. That's how close we are.

I am so drunk.

"Do you?" he asks, his tone holding amusement.

"Nope, I've been so good this year, Santa." I shake my head. "Wait… wrong costume… wrong fetish."

He chuckles and reaches up to tuck my hair behind my ear. "You're drunk."

"I am," I admit, flashing my eyes at him. "So are you."

"I am," he replies on a breath.

"You should get back to work," I murmur, glancing between his eyes and his lips.

"We're at a party."

"Right." Duh. I'm so stupid. "Can you help me get back into my costume?"

"Sure." He steps away from me and crouches on the floor, holding the feet part open for me so I can step into them. He pulls the costume up my body, his hands slide up the outside of my legs, slightly lifting my dress as he goes.

My body is on fire again for an entirely different reason this time.

I push my arms through, breathing heavy and still wobbling.

"Happy Halloween, Mr. C," I whisper and press my lips against the corner of his mouth.

Because that was a good idea that I won't regret when I'm sober.

I don't wait to see his reaction; I pull the thing over my head and zip it up tight before exiting the room completely deflated. The costume… not me.

It inflates as I go, the battery pack on the inside humming gently.

What an awesome night.

"Where were you?" Pax asks, his tone accusatory and harsh.

"Bathroom," I reply, shaking my inflatable butt some more. "Shall we go home and have sex?"

His eyes soften and his lips quirk with a smile.

"What about Laurie?"

I look at my little moocow all grinding up against her new lover.

"She's good, she's going home with him tonight."

"Well then," he says with a smile. "Let's get you home and thoroughly fucked."

Thoroughly fucked indeed.

The following Monday at work I have officially reached legendary status. Apparently, I won best costume but I left before I could receive

my prize so that was waiting for me on my desk this morning. It's a bottle of whiskey and a plaque that I proudly display on my desk for all to see.

Truth be told, I've been dreading coming in today. I texted Mr. C yesterday asking him to call me and he never did so I'm guessing that's because he's mad that I kissed him.

Although it wasn't really a kiss and I was really drunk.

I knock on his door and enter, remembering how dark it was in here just two nights ago.

"Hey," I say softly, smiling at my boss who is working at his laptop.

"Hey, Godzilla, how's your head?"

"Better than I deserve," I respond with a shy smile. He grins but doesn't look up from his laptop. "Can I… talk to you?"

His brows are raised and his eyes curious when he finally gives me his attention. He also seems nervous, and I vaguely wonder why but decide to focus on my own misgivings right now. "What is it?"

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for my behavior in your office at the party," I mumble, and he shifts uncomfortably in his chair before standing and rounding his table to lean against the side closest to me.

"*Your* behavior?" He looks confused now, definitely wary.

"Yeah, I kind of maybe kissed you when I was getting dressed?"

His lips part. "That's all that happened?"

I panic. "Why? Did I do something else?"

"No." He raises his hands, laughing. "*You* didn't do anything. And don't worry about the kiss. It wasn't even a kiss."

"It kinda was though. My lips were on your lips," I argue, still feeling panicked. "It wasn't appropriate at all."

"You kissed me like I used to kiss my grandma. Trust me. Out of the two of us, your intentions were innocent." He mumbles the last part and I don't think I was supposed to hear it. When he checks his watch, I say my goodbyes. I don't know what's going through his mind, but I'm terrified of it.

What did he mean I was the innocent one? And he kept saying that I didn't do anything wrong in a way that implied somebody else did.

I don't recall that he did anything wrong, but I was super drunk.

I remember him helping me get dressed and that's it. Nothing inappropriate happened. Right?

My head hurts.

I suppose it doesn't matter. Not really.

I decide to draw a line under it.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fourteen

He's not afraid to dress up.

Pax and I have been dating for just over two months, not really the longest time in the grand scheme of things but long enough for me to know that I absolutely adore him. He's just amazing.

He's so sweet and considerate. Excellent in bed.

Well… until now anyway. Right now he's being a dick.

"Can't you wear something a little more… revealing?" he asks, kissing my neck as I look at our reflection in the store mirror.

It's Mr. C's annual Christmas party this weekend, a great opportunity to network. Pax is going as my plus one and he's looking forward to it.

"I want to be the envy of every single man in the room," he whispers against my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

"I don't feel comfortable in revealing clothes. You know this."

"I know, it doesn't have to be super revealing, just sexy."

I can't hide the hurt I feel at his words. "I thought you wanted me to be whoever I am?"

"I'm hardly asking you to change," he grumbles, pulling away from me. "I just want you to dress a little differently for once. Is that so bad?"

He traces a line from my ear to my shoulder, pulling down my stretchy T-shirt as he goes.

"What would you suggest?" I ask quietly. I can do this for him. It's not a big deal.

He pulls me out of the store I chose and straight into a Saks. Basically it's where rich people buy their Versace and Gucci and Armani… or whatever.

"You're paying," I say, blanching at the first price tag I come across.

"Anything you want," he replies, hooking his arm around my neck and taking me straight to a section of cocktail dresses.

Most women would be thrilled at the prospect of a successful and very sexy guy spending his cash on clothes for them, but I'm not.

Mainly because this feels like the start of something bad and not something good at all.

"Holy shit," he mutters when I try on a two-piece, black lace top and skirt. It's mostly see-through with black covering my more intimate parts. "You look… incredible."

"I feel naked," I say, frowning.

"You don't look naked, I promise." His hungry eyes eat my form and his hands slide down my bare arms. "Now all we need are heels and a sparkly necklace that just touches the top of your breasts." His fingers trail the necklace design he has in his mind and he guides his erection into my rear. "Let's get you some new underwear while we're here too. I've seen everything you have already."

The skirt gets caught under my foot when I try to move away from him. I'm being a bitch. He's just trying to do a nice thing for me and I'm acting like a bitch.

"I love it," I lie to appease him after seeing his smile falter.

"Good," he whispers, touching his lips to mine. "Because I love you."

My heart implodes, explodes, whatever, it just fills with so much joy.

"I love you too," I respond automatically because I'm certain that I do.

"Then let me spoil you," he breathes and picks me up with his arms around my waist.

I have never felt more uncomfortable in my life. At least I'm not overdressed though because every woman entering Mr. C's huge home is in a fancy, red-carpet-ready outfit.

I have my hair done and curled over both shoulders, my makeup was professionally done because I'm hopeless, and I'm wearing a stunning diamond necklace that just tickles the dip where my breasts meet.

I feel out of place despite the fact I blend in better than I ever have.

"Stop fidgeting," Pax whispers though his tone is light and happy. "You look fucking stunning. I'll be the envy of every man at this party."

I hold his arm as we nod at people we've never met and enter the huge home that I'm familiar with. I try not to bite my lips because of the dark red matte lipstick that has been professionally applied.

"Oh my God," Mrs. Conti says, looking glamorous in a sparkling green dress as her brown eyes look me up and down. "Is that you,

Rose?"

I start twisting my hands again, but Pax stops me and brings my hand to his lips.

"It certainly is, Mrs. Conti, isn't she gorgeous?"

Mrs. Conti releases a nervous laugh, still eyeing me. "Who would have thought there was such a swan beneath those clothes."

"Don't," I beg, fighting the urge to cover myself as Mr. C joins us near the entrance, laughing at something a man behind him has said. He hasn't looked at me yet and I hope he never does. I don't know what it is about him that has me wanting to shrink back even further into my old clothes. I'm terrified of him seeing me this way again.

I just want to go home already.

"Rose, you know where everything is," Mrs. Conti says, nodding for me to move along. She doesn't want her husband to see me. Or that's what I'm getting from this.

I don't want him to see me either. I respect him. I don't want him to see me as a woman. Not again.

"I want to go home," I tell Pax when we move along, ready to hit the bar. Maria isn't here, she must be with her grandparents.

"Stop whining," he whispers, kissing my temple. "We'll be eating soon."

I rush into the next room, wondering if it's possible to avoid Mr. C for the rest of the night. I wish I put a change of clothes in the trunk of Pax's car.

I down a glass of gin, hoping that it calms my nerves and order another. Pax mingles and talks, introducing me to everyone as his girlfriend and of course it's sweet but it's also quite possessive in the way he tells people.

A buffet of food is open, and waiters stand to serve the more difficult choices as people help themselves.

I skip the food, have another drink and leave Pax to talk with three men from other branches of Mr. C's company.

I'm accosted twice by men I don't know, and the women are so nice, but I just don't want to be here. I'm about to have a panic attack. I'm not coping.

I turn in the center, forgetting my bearings for a moment and all the faces blur into laughing, morphed and warped masks.

I duck out of the room, somebody calls my name, but I keep going, desperate to just be out of here.

I race up the wide, curving staircase and down the long hall. Straight for Maria's room.

It's the only room I know really.

I push open the door and slam it shut behind me, kicking off my heels and grabbing my hair.

I can't cope. I'm not coping.

I grab her huge stuffed teddy that's half the size of me and sit cross-legged by her bed, holding it tightly in my arms. I wish I had a room like this growing up. I wish I had my own room at all.

It's neat, tidy, every toy has its place, her bed is huge with a translucent white canopy and twinkling lights dangling from it.

I squeeze the bear but it's not the same as my stress ball. I wish I'd put it in my bag.

The door clicks open.

"Occupied," I call out, keeping my cheek pressed to the top of the bear.

Whoever it is steps into the room and doesn't stop until they're crouched in front of me.

They take my hands and pull them free of the bear, then remove the bear and pull me until I'm looking up at them.

I look into his kind, concerned gray eyes and stand as he pulls me.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I didn't mean to ditch your party."

"Shhh," he replies, keeping a hold of my hand and leading me to the door.

"Please don't make me go back," I beg, digging my heels in and gripping his wrist.

"I'm not." He leads me out of his daughter's room, looking right and left before pulling me out with him and further down the hall to the master bedroom.

So this is where he and Mrs. Conti sleep? It's exactly how I imagined it. Modern, shiny, polished, expensive. Way too big. So much space. The bed looks plush though and well made.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he leads me to his closet and opens the door. I wait for him as he steps inside and crouches low to pick up a large, shiny blue box.

He puts it on the bed and takes off the lid, then removes tissue-like paper and tosses it to the side. This entire process neither of us say a word.

Then he lifts something out. Something designer, but definitely different and unique. It's a deep purple pantsuit that will absolutely bury me in every way I want it to. It's gorgeous. I love it.

"Merry Christmas," he says, and it finally clicks that this is for me. He got me something I'd like and now he's giving it to me so I can wear it. Because *he* doesn't care what I wear to a stupid party.

I don't say anything, I just move, wrapping my arms around his neck and squeezing so tight I'm not sure he can breathe. I want him to know how grateful I am and how much this means to me. He returns the embrace, dropping the suit on the bed. His hand goes to the base of my spine whereas the other goes to the back of my neck, holding

me tightly against him.

He's married, I remind myself as I try not to react to the feel of his solid body against my own. It's impossible. I feel connected to him right now on a level deeper than anything I've ever felt with anybody in my entire life.

His touch gets firmer, he brings me in closer and his face goes into my hair and neck. He inhales, his arms trapping me to his body so tight I can't move at all. I'm not sure I want to.

But I have to.

I start to pull away, trying not to cry at his thoughtful gift and the moment we just shared.

"Merry Christmas, Ezra," I breathe, pulling back completely, terrified that we'll be caught in such an intimate embrace.

He lets me go and I see it in his eyes, longing. He doesn't want to let me go any more than I wanted to make him.

He's married, I remind myself again and reach for the suit.

I'm getting changed.

When I return to the party, Pax is waiting, looking around anxiously.

"What happened to the dress?" he asks, looking me up and down.

"That wasn't a dress, it was a bikini in lace." I'm mad at him because he should have been the one to make me feel how Ezra just made me feel.

He notices the look I cut him with and doesn't argue. He does however glare at Mr. C who is talking to a group of men.

When he notices me looking, he waves me over and the two men and one woman look eager to meet me.

"I'll be back," I say to Pax and I'm grateful when he doesn't follow me. I think he's read my ire loud and clear.

Still wearing the shoes I wore to the party, I make my way to them, smiling and feeling a lot more confident than before.

"Father, this is my incredible PA, Rose," Mr. C declares, introducing me to the well-dressed silver-haired man in the middle of the group. I stammer for a second on my breath because of how absolutely gorgeous he is, just like his son I suppose. Age has done him kind. "Rose, this is my father, the real Mr. Conti, and my mother…"

"It's Izabella," she finishes for him, kissing both of my cheeks. "And my husband, Mario. We've heard much about you."

"Same," I reply happily. "I'm the one who sends you gifts on your birthdays and anniversaries."

"Hey," Mr. C admonishes, smiling jokingly. "You're not supposed to tell them that."

I shrug my shoulders. "Too late now."

“I like her,” Mario says, his older face cut with so many wrinkles you can tell he has smiled his entire life. “Maria talks of you fondly too.”

“She never stops.” Izabella exaggerates an eye roll. “I think she prefers you now to me.”

“I love her, she’s amazing. Such a sweet kid.”

“Do you have any children?” Izabella asks kindly.

“She’s too young to have children,” Mario puts in and I’m inclined to agree.

“No kids. I’m not even nearly ready for that. I don’t think I ever will be,” I admit with a crinkled nose. “I love kids but I’m not sure I could ever have my own. I like order too much.”

“She definitely likes order too much.” Mr. C says this with affection and no distain. He smiles down at me and winks, but I just can’t find the courage to meet his eyes. “It’s what makes her such a good PA.”

“I’m Bastion, by the way,” the older guy on Mario’s right says with a big grin. “Mario’s younger, more handsome brother.”

“Yeah, right,” Mario replies and Ezra chuckles along with him.

I shake his hand and kiss his cheek. “It’s nice to meet you all.”

“How long have you been working with my son?” Mario asks.

“Almost a year. January eighth I think it was.”

Ezra nods his confirmation. “I just can’t believe how fast the year has gone. Maria is ten now. It’s crazy to me.”

“I wish you’d had more babies,” Izabella remarks sadly.

“Not now, Mom.”

They fall silent for a beat, nobody looking at anybody in particular.

Awkward…

“Where is our daughter-in-law?” Mario asks, looking over the heads of all the guests.

“She’s overseeing the party, she’ll come to us eventually.”

Izabella pats her son’s cheek. “Tell her it’ll be nice to see her.”

“I will.”

“Well, as thrilling as you men are, I think I’m going to commandeer your PA and discuss this fabulous suit she’s wearing. Very daring.” Izabella takes my arm in hers and guides me away. I don’t look at Mr. C, not directly. After what happened upstairs, I’m almost too scared to. “Do you like gin?”

“I prefer whiskey, but I rarely say no when gin is offered,” I reply as we make our way to the bar.

“I used to love whiskey back in the day but now it gives me a sore throat.”

We spend an hour together in the lounge, giggling over drinks, talking about work and life. She almost cries when I tell her about my

past, being carted from foster home to foster home with nothing but a black bag full of clothes and one teddy bear that got stolen and ripped when I was twelve.

She pulls me in for a hug, rocking us from side to side. “You poor thing. I always considered fostering children, but I never had the time. Now I wish I’d made the time.”

“You’d have been amazing at it, I can tell,” I mutter.

When she pulls back, she’s smiling again albeit sadly, but at least she’s smiling. “Please tell me you have someone to spend Christmas with?”

“I usually spend it with my best friend, Laurie, and her parents.” I had spoken to Pax about it kind of, he’s going to Washington until the New Year so I won’t be seeing him and I haven’t spoken to Laurie. I think she assumes I’d be spending it with Pax. We’ve hardy spoken since Halloween, she’s in too deep with Kyle, the man from floor five.

Still, I’m not about to spend Christmas with a stranger. That’s weird.

“Well, you’re always welcome to come to our home if you enjoy eating excellent food with a bunch of old folks. My son spends the day with his own family now and they don’t usually join us until after dinner. A shame because Maria would love it but her mother prefers the company of her own family.”

I frown at that but don’t comment, it’s not my place. “Thank you so much for the offer, that’s really kind of you.”

“Then it’s settled…”

“Oh no, I meant——”

“You’ll come to our house. Oh, it’ll be so nice having the extra company and I know Erika will appreciate it too when she joins us.”

Oh shit. “*Yay*.”

Mario joins us finally and gives me a smile when his wife hugs him and drunkenly declares, “Excellent news, darling.”

“What’s that, dear?”

“Rose is spending Christmas with us.”

I smile cringe because what else can I do at this point?

“Oh how lovely,” Mario replies. “Do you play chess?”

“Monopoly?” she asks.

“I play chess or Monopoly; I can play most things.”

He leans closer. “Can you play an instrument?”

“Nope? Can you?”

“Nope.”

I laugh at how random he is and sip more of my drink.

We chat some more but I see Pax coming my way, eager to get my attention.

“I think it’s time for me to leave. Why don’t you call the office

tomorrow with the time and place and I'll get back to you?" I suggest, knowing she's probably just extending an offer based on the amount of alcohol she has consumed.

"Oh no, I'll be sad when you leave," Izabella whines like we've been best friends for years. "Must you?"

"I'm beat," I mutter with a shrug of my shoulders. "And I have an early day tomorrow."

"Our son working you hard?"

"Always," I reply, smiling.

I hug Izabella and kiss Mario's cheeks and turn to find Pax in the middle of a conversation with Ezra.

"You ready?" I ask him and he nods, his lips a thin line as he regards me.

Ezra looks between us both. "Thanks for coming."

I pat his shoulder awkwardly because everyone is watching, and it felt like a good idea at the time.

"I don't know why I did that," I mutter to him and myself and he bites his lip to stifle his smile. "See you at work tomorrow, Mr. C."

"See you tomorrow," he replies, still smiling.

I leave their house with a skip in my step but that soon fades when we get to Pax's car and he completely ignores me for the entire journey home.

My heart tingles and thumps in my chest, surrounded by painful spikes that stab me every time I try to make conversation and he ignores me.

My eyes burn.

I don't know what I did.

"Please talk to me," I beg him, hoping that he didn't see me hug Mr. C.

No, it can't be that, he talked to me after that.

Then what?

"Please," I whisper, placing my hand on his thigh. "What did I do?"

"You fucking humiliated me," he snaps when we pull up outside of my house.

I jump when he hits his hand against the steering wheel.

"You absolutely fucking humiliated me."

"I…" I shake my head, lips parted, struggling to find something to say. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

"Because you don't think of anybody but yourself."

I look at him, still surprised by this. We've never argued before, not really. This is new. "I don't know what I did, tell me what I did, and I'll make sure to never do it again."

"Forget it," he hisses, leaning over me to open the door to the car.

“Get out.”

“Are you… are you breaking up with me?” My heart clenches painfully, a thousand knives stabbing into it from all angles.

“I don’t know.” He keeps his eyes forward and his hands on the steering wheel. “Just go.”

“Please, Pax. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I did but I swear I didn’t mean it. Sometimes I get stuck in my own head. Don’t leave me mad. Please.”

“Stop begging!” he yells, slamming his hand on the steering wheel again. “Stop fucking begging. You sound so pathetic.”

I sniffle and wipe my tears on my wrist as I climb out of the car. I don’t say anything else as I close the door and watch him peel away, tires skidding on the asphalt.

My hands tremble as I unlock the door to my apartment and I immediately pull up his number on my phone and try to call him.

The thought of him breaking up with me now is too much to bear. I thought we had a really good thing going.

I guess not.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fifteen

He gives the most incredible hugs.

"Will you pay attention?" Mr. C yells at me, it was only a matter of time, I've been making stupid errors for the past couple of days. My head is not in it at all. "Late this morning and now your head is fuck knows where. I know you're tired, trust me, I'm tired too but I need you on the ball today."

"I'm sorry," I mutter, shaking my head to get me into it again. "I haven't slept in days."

"Are you sick?" he asks, his voice calmer now.

"No, it's just Pax and I——"

He cuts me off and hisses, "Trust me, I *don't* need to know about you and *Pax*. You're like a couple of teenagers. Do you ever stop?"

"He broke up with me the night of your party, if that answers your question," I mumble, yawning again. "And I know I shouldn't let it affect my work but…" I shake my head. "Never mind… it doesn't matter."

With his hands on the desk and his eyes on me he sighs and then rubs his own eyes. "I shouldn't have yelled. I should have known something was wrong, you've never been this scatterbrained in your entire employment." He sits in the chair I usually sit in, his eyes dancing over me, a bit like we've danced around the topic of that embrace we shared in his marital bedroom. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it but I'm definitely not about to bring it up. "What happened?"

I raise my hands and let them fall. "I don't know. He said I embarrassed him and then he left and hasn't spoken to me since."

"He's an ass," he growls. "You did nothing to embarrass him. He was probably drunk and——"

"He was driving, not drinking. You're right, he's just an ass. First he dragged me to that party in clothes I didn't want to wear," I glare, but not at Ezra, at the situation. "And then I'm like okay are you breaking up with me? And he said… *I don't know*. And hasn't called me since."

“Is he in his office?”

“He’s visiting his family in Washington,” I flop onto the sofa and throw my arm over my eyes. “I shouldn’t be talking to you about this stuff. I’m sorry. Let me have an hour nap and I’ll feel better afterwards.”

Shutting my eyes, I dangle one of my legs over the back of the couch and the other stretches along the seats.

I hear the lock on the door click and peek over my arm.

“What are you doing?” I ask and he moves to where I’m sprawled.

“If you’re having a nap, I’m having a nap.”

“Where are you going to nap? I’ve taken your spot and I’m not moving.”

He chuckles and lifts my legs, forcing me to move the one that I draped over the back. He sits where my legs were and shuffles down, resting his legs on the coffee table. I’m about to do the same when he places my legs over his thighs and rests his arm along the back of the couch.

“This is——”

“Nap, Rose.”

My lips clamp shut, and I try to ignore the tingling feeling spiraling through my legs.

I close my eyes, surprised I can even relax. I’m not sure this is appropriate. I’m not sure how I’ll explain it if anyone asks, but I don’t care. I really am tired, and this really is quite comfortable.

I fall asleep with too much ease.

When I wake up again, an hour has passed, the phone is ringing, and Mr. C is still asleep.

I slide my feet from his lap one at a time. He doesn’t stir.

I answer the phone and take the call as quietly as I can. It’s luckily nothing too important.

I get back on with the job I screwed up before my nap, feeling groggy but better than I did. I also call for coffee. Lots and lots of coffee.

He stretches about twenty minutes later and his hand reaches out, patting the sofa to find me. When he realizes I’m gone he finds me at his desk and smiles softly.

“Better?” he asks.

I nod and puncture a hole in a sheet of paper before adding it to a large binder. “Much.”

“You still haven’t booked your annual leave and I’m starting to think you need it.”

“I’m starting to think you’re right.”

He laughs quietly and we work alongside each other in better moods now.

“Oh, by the way,” I say, smiling at him again as sweetly as I can muster. “I’m spending Christmas with your parents.”

“Of course you are,” he mutters, laughing again. “How did that happen?”

“Ask your mom. I don’t remember.”

He looks amused as he works, and every so often, he looks up at me and smiles.

We’re definitely in a better place again. I wish I could say the same about Pax.

“You’ll figure it out,” Ezra reassures me. “He’d be an idiot to let you go.”

“I do believe that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” I jest, placing my hand over my heart.

“Shut up.”

Christmas comes and to say it has been an amazing day would be an understatement. I met with Erika who joined us with her husband, Steve, whose actual name is Lithuanian, and I couldn’t pronounce it so he’s letting me call him Steve.

The Conti family are incredibly warm, kind, and funny people.

I’m so glad I took a chance and came here.

After dinner is over, Maria arrives with her parents and she is so happy to see me. I hug her and listen to her ramble on about the gifts she got. To say she’s from a rich family, she didn’t get a lot. She hasn’t been spoiled with every gadget and gizmo money can buy. I love that.

I even have a conversation with Mrs. Conti, aka Ezra’s wife, without wanting to slap her around the face. She can be funny after wine. I might even like her if she’d never been my employer and I didn’t know what she was like with her staff.

I especially find it funny when Mario pulls faces at her behind her back, he’s not being mean, he’s just drunk and having a good time.

Maria joins in with her papa and I just sit as I listen to Mrs. Conti talk about her trip to Europe last year, trying not to insult her by laughing.

Mr. C sits beside her and plays with her hair as she speaks, and then her neck, and her shoulders. I watch him attentively touch her in front of us all as though he’s not even aware he’s doing it.

I can’t tear my eyes away. I’m mesmerized for some reason, just watching his fingers move back and forth.

They do their Christmas ornament tradition, which is where they each hang their own ornament with their name on the tree and make a wish. It’s the sweetest thing and brings a tear to my eye. I wish I had that growing up.

“Who wants to play Monopoly?” Mario asks and everyone groans.

“I probably shouldn’t,” I reply, picking at a piece of lint on the knee of the pajamas the Contis got me as a last-minute Christmas gift. They’re festive, red and white pajamas with a glowing Rudolph on the T-shirt. I love them. I might never take them off. “I don’t do well with games.”

“Too competitive?”

“No, I——”

“Please play with us,” Maria begs as Izabella sets the board game up on the coffee table in the middle of the room.

“She’ll play,” Mr. C accepts on my behalf, a teasing smile on his lips. Erika places cushions on the ground and we all sit and choose our pieces. Then Mr. C whispers something in his daughter’s ear and she gasps and runs away with a gleam in her eyes.

“I want to be the doggy!” she yells over her shoulder.

Mr. C eyes me with a mischievous smile, one that makes him look so boyish and young but also devilishly handsome. I’m nervous now. What is he plotting?

Mrs. Conti looks between us, sitting to her husband’s right and I know she’s not comfortable with whatever is transpiring. So, I make it a point to engage Erika in conversation and ignore Mr. C while Mario plays banker and gives us all our cash.

Meanwhile Maria returns and I tidy up the board, neatening the cards so everything is in line.

Izabella, who saw me do this at dinner, and with the wrapping paper, just grins at me and lets me get on with it.

Ezra, however, gives me a smirk and a pointed look. “Leave it.”

I’m confident that he’s not about to start throwing things at me in front of his parents, so, while holding his eyes, I reach over to his side and line up his cash with the edge of the board.

“Last warning,” he tells me, still smiling at me and I wonder what people think of this exchange.

Sitting back, I take the dice and roll an eight, then move my piece along the board. It’s game on.

We go around the board once and I really do fight it, I tap my fingers on my leg and chew on the inside of my mouth, I sip my eggnog and really focus on the game. I stay in good banter and conversation with the rest of them, but it’s just itching below the surface.

Below the surface.

Below the surface.

NO!

I blow my hair out of my face and watch Erika take her turn.

She gets a community card and lifts the top one from the pile, the pile goes askew, and I automatically reach for it and crush it all back

in place with the tips of my fingers.

Something stringy and pink hits my glasses. Maria falls down laughing and her dad wields a can of silly string, pointing it directly at my face.

Using the tips of my fingers, I peel the pink stuff from my glasses and glare at him.

He looks far too pleased with himself. “You were warned.”

“Oh you absolute——” I’m about to call him an asshole but then I remember Maria and just narrow my eyes on him. “No fair.”

“What are you doing?” Mrs. Conti hisses at her husband as the rest of them laugh at the hilarity of it.

“Keep playing, guys,” he tells them, ignoring his wife’s question, still looking really proud of himself.

He loves to throw things at me when I succumb to my urges. Like when he calls me into his office and I neaten whatever is on his desk, he’ll flick water at me or slap my hand with a plastic ruler or whatever is in reach that won’t do any genuine harm. If I’m too far from him he’ll throw pens at me or paperclips, again whatever he has that doesn’t do harm.

It’s become a little game of his *or ours*. He just laughs and ducks when I get frustrated and throw things back at him. Usually heavier things than what he throws at me.

Three rounds later, with me constantly twitching during conversation I absentmindedly move a couple of houses on the board and more silly string hits me in the face.

“Will you stop that?” I growl, rolling up the string into a ball and throwing it at him.

“Don’t be rude to our guest,” Mario defends me, I love him even more now.

Mr. C squirts him in the face too and Mario just gives him a deadpan look as he pulls the pink from his cheek and shoulder.

Maria and her father fall around giggling like little children and I can forgive him for picking on me purely because I get to see how much love they have for each other. I don’t mind being the butt of the joke for the night, not when the reaction is so heartwarming. I love seeing families playing, especially because I never had one.

Izabella places her hand on mine as though hearing my thoughts and squeezes. She doesn’t say anything; we just sit like that for a while until it’s my turn to roll.

“Fair warning,” I say the next time he squirts me. “I will rain hell on you in the office when we go back.”

“Bring. It. On.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Sixteen

He is so much fun.

New Year's Eve is almost over before I know it, and what a night it has been. Laurie has particularly bad tics tonight and threw two drinks by mistake in the last place we frequented. We ended up getting her a plastic bottle with a pull top for her to use instead. It has been a lot better since that genius idea, *thank you, me*, despite the fact we had to run from three girls whose dresses she ruined.

We are incredibly drunk, have been dancing all night, and Pax has called me constantly. So constantly I have had to block his number. Laurie talked me into it, said his behavior is alarming. She might be right about that, but I still feel I should allow him to explain himself. Just not tonight. Not on a night meant for fun.

I stopped calling him on Christmas Day after a talk with Izabella. She gave me her wisdom on how he's an ass and I have to agree. Whatever I did, I didn't deserve him ghosting me like that.

Yet, surprisingly, since this morning he has called me a lot. I wasn't expecting him to. I genuinely believed we were done and have been getting myself in the right frame of mind to accept that.

I don't know if he's back because I stopped calling, or if he's only now calming down. Whatever the reason, I'm not interested… not right now anyway. I'm mad and hurt which is to be expected.

I genuinely did love him, I still do too. He was a fucking whirlwind, so fun and charming and he made me feel sexy, until recently when he made me feel like I wasn't enough in the same night he left me because I embarrassed him… *by not being enough*.

I try not to think about it. It makes me angry and I'm too drunk to be angry.

Laurie and I scream the countdown, although she mostly just screams random words instead of numbers and I am now realizing I only have a handful of people I want to send a HAPPY NEW YEAR to. I make it my resolution to be friendlier this year and expand my group of people.

Rose: Happy New Year, Izabella. Thank you for being so kind to me.

Izabella: Happy New Year to you too, sweet girl. I will call you tomorrow, we'll plan a dinner.

Rose: Happy New Year, Mr. C. Thanks for being an AWESOME boss and sometimes friend. Don't dance too much and hurt your old man joints. X

So I'm not sure they're typed exactly the way I'm saying them in my head, but close enough.

My phone rings as I'm waiting in the girls' room for a stall to free up.

"Yellooooo?" I answer drunkenly, snorting at how dumb I sound.

"I called to tell you that I'm not an old man, you little shit, but I am already at home, in my slippers, drinking whiskey alone."

"That's devastating, Mr. C, you're letting every middle-aged man down. Way to be a team player."

"I'm not middle-aged, I'm thirty-seven."

I giggle into the receiver. "Thirty-eight in two months."

"Thank you for keeping track of my age," he replies in jest. "What are you doing?"

"I'm in club ninety-nine with Laurie. It's great but she's wayyyy drunk and her tics are crazy. What are you doing?"

"I already told you."

Right… duh.

"Where's Maria?" I ask, shuffling a few steps to the left as the massive line moves along.

He clears his throat. "They're all with Elizabeth's parents."

"And you're not because…?"

"Because I got bored."

"You can always join me if you like? This club doesn't close until sunrise."

He hesitates and I can just tell he's thinking about it. "No… you have a good night. Call me if you need a ride."

"We're good, we're only a few blocks from home, but thank you, Mr. C."

"Ezra," he corrects, and I giggle again. "Happy New Year, Rose."

"Happy New Year, Ezra."

I wonder if he's smiling like I am right now. I hope he is.

“Would it be weird if I go and have dinner with your mom tomorrow?” I ask Mr. C as we stroll towards the waiting car.

It’s the second of January and everybody is a bit glum now that the holiday season is over. I’m glad to have been out of the office for most of the day thus far, taking notes and recording Mr. C’s presentation for another potential buyer and investor into his company’s solar tech.

He opens the door for me, I climb in and shuffle over and then he climbs in after me, smelling all citrussy and fresh.

“She likes you. So does Erika actually, and my dad. And Erika doesn’t like many people. Why would it be weird?”

I bite on my lip. “Your wife doesn’t like me.”

His head swings around to me, he looks surprised and I feel surprised that I even brought his wife into the conversation. I try to actively avoid talking about her. She’s not as rude to me anymore as she used to be, but she does look at me weirdly, like she’s assessing everything I do.

I still see Maria often and take her to soccer, I enjoy my days with her, but Mrs. Conti has this incredible ability to make you feel wanted and needed, but also super inferior. She acts like she’s grateful for all I do for her, but it never feels sincere. I know she’d stop me from seeing Maria in an instant if she thought I was after her husband, she’s a very jealous person. Margot, her housekeeper, told me that’s why she never talks, especially not to Mr. Conti. She said their last two nannies and a maid were fired because of the way they spoke to Mr. Conti. Apparently, they were, too *flirtatious*.

According to Margot, she’s heard them arguing over me too, but I told her not to elaborate. I don’t want any part of their marriage. If she’s got an issue with me then it’s her problem because I would never try and take her husband. That’s not the kind of person I am.

Although we did sit in her kitchen and have coffee together just two days ago… coffee I made but still. Progress.

“I mean… I don’t want to cause issues by hanging around all the time.”

His eyes darken as the driver pulls away from the curb. “Has Elizabeth said something to you?”

Could that be what they’ve argued over about me? The fact I’m often around?

“No! No. Honestly, since everything she’s a lot nicer.” I don’t know why but I place my hand on his thigh. “I’m not about to start insulting your wife. I didn’t… I just don’t want to step on anybody’s toes.”

I remove my hand when he shifts on the spot. I’m not sure if it’s because of me that he squirmed in such a way or not but I don’t want to make him uncomfortable.

He grabs his tablet from his briefcase and puts it on his lap, turning it on before opening his emails. “You’re not stepping on anybody’s toes. My mom adores you, Rose. It’s all good.”

I smile at him, feeling elated because I was worried he’d be upset with the situation. “Thanks, Ezra.”

“No problem,” he replies, sounding strained.

“Are you feeling okay?” I ask, laughing gently. “You sound off.”

“I’m fine,” he replies, his eyes still on his tablet. “Can you just focus on your job and less on me?”

My lips part at his harshly spoken dismissal.

“Of course, Mr. Conti,” I mutter and see him flinch, but he doesn’t say anything else.

After around ten minutes of near silence, I broach a new work topic, “What’s on the agenda for the rest of the day?”

“You need to book your annual leave; the year is almost over.”

“Do I have to?”

“It’s the law.”

“Says who?”

“Law people.”

I laugh, throwing my head back with it. “*Law people*.” We share a smile. I love it when he graces me with his boyish side, he doesn’t display it enough and he can be so much fun when he wants to be. “Can’t I transfer it to next year?”

“You’re going to have to because your twelve months of employment are up.”

“Good point. Also…” I chew on my lip. “My contract ends in six months.” This has been a topic I haven’t dared bring up because I’m terrified he won’t keep me on. I don’t want to start somewhere new all over again. I love my job.

“You’ll be signing another as soon as it does, don’t you worry about that,” he murmurs, still looking at his tablet but he only seems to be scrolling through emails without actually looking at them. Is he just trying to look busy?

When his phone rings I’ve never seen him look so relieved.

He’s so weird sometimes.

I tap my fingers on the leather interior as he has his conversation but he reaches for my hand with his and squeezes it so I can’t move it at all. It’s not that it annoys him, he’s just trying to help me curb the habit. I do it a lot less in his presence because of it.

When I start tapping with the other one, he gives me a pointed look and I stop instantly. But his hand doesn’t lift from mine and I wonder if he even realizes he’s still holding it.

“Get it to Rose by the end of the day,” he tells whoever is on the phone and then hangs up. I wish I was listening to his call. I have no

idea what I'm being sent or what I'm supposed to do with it.

"My fingers are numb," I utter, and he looks down at my hand trapped beneath his against the leather between us.

"Sorry." After finally letting me go, he starts on his tablet again and doesn't make conversation at all while I flex my fingers and fight the urge to start tapping them again.

"I'll take a week soon, okay? I'll sort the office out too and get everyone in order but I'm not letting anybody use my desk. Understood?"

"Yes, boss," he jokes, grinning at me now and not his tablet. "It'll be hard without you." He quickly corrects himself with wide eyes. "Work… work will be hard without you. You're an excellent PA."

What else could he have meant for him to correct himself?

"If you need me, just call. I'll be bored anyway. I might steal your child."

"I'm sure she'd love that."

"I'm not kidding," I respond, laughing. "You think I'm kidding but I'm not. I'm going to be bored out of my mind."

His tone is warm and kind when he says, "You're so good with Maria. I can't remember if I ever thanked you for that."

"I love her. I really wish she was mine." I close my eyes with exasperation at myself and count to six to gather my thoughts. Then I ramble, "Not that I want to have your babies or anything… I just meant that because she's and I'm… I love her. I hope when we have a daughter, she'll be like her." FUCK. "Not *we* as in you and me… but we as in… I don't even know what I'm saying anymore."

Mouth meet foot.

"What's wrong with me that you don't want my babies?" he jokes to lighten my embarrassment.

I smack him on the chest. "Don't tease me."

"Don't be so easy to tease."

I stick my tongue out at him and tap the tablet on his lap. "Go back to mindlessly scrolling through emails in a bid to ignore me."

"I wasn't ignoring you."

"Lies."

He chuckles and does exactly what I told him to do until we pull up outside of the office and get back to work. Little does he know I've got something super special planned for him on Tuesday.

Little did I know that Pax had something special planned for me too, except today, not Tuesday.

Waiting on my desk is a huge bouquet of flowers, a box of expensive-looking chocolates, and a large wrapped box that I daren't open.

"Wow…" I mutter, cringe smiling at the sight. This is so

embarrassing. Couldn't he have brought these to my house?

Mr. C mutters something unintelligible under his breath and slams his office door behind him, leaving me to deal with this alone.

I move the flowers to the window ledge and reach for the card.

"Forgive me. I was an ass.
I love you.
P
Xxx"

Strong arms wrap around me from behind, holding my back to a toned chest.

He picks me up so my feet are dangling off the floor and I can hardly breathe.

"Say you'll forgive me?" Pax whispers in my ear, kissing the shell and then my neck. "I won't put you down until you do."

"I'm not a handbag, I'm heavy. You'll have to put me down eventually." I can't help but feel a little bit happy about his groveling.

"Forgive me?"

"I still don't know what I did wrong."

"You didn't do anything wrong; it was me; I was jealous that your attention wasn't on me all night and even more jealous when you chose to wear something *he* gave you over something *I* gave you."

He puts me down so I can turn in his arms. "I didn't realize that's what…" I sigh. "I'm sorry. Honestly, you don't have to worry about me and Mr. Conti. He's married and I'm with you. I'm not going to ruin that." His smile is blinding but I stop him as he swoops in for a kiss. "But please don't do that again. If you want to get mad, get mad, but talk to me about it so I can fix it. I couldn't eat or sleep. That's not fair."

"I know. I behaved like a child," he whispers, pecking my lips as often as he can.

"I'm not denying you your epiphany," I respond, feeling a lot lighter than I have all week. "One more chance. I'm not putting myself through this three times. Twice is my limit."

"I won't fuck it up." He deepens the kiss for a moment and hugs me for a longer moment. I've missed his body against mine. "Date night tonight?"

"Not tonight," I answer, glancing towards Mr. Conti's office. I swear I just saw his blinds twitch out of the corner of my eye. He's probably waiting for a safe moment to tell me to get back to work. "Thursday?"

"Why not tomorrow?"

“I’ve got plans then too.” I push him away from me.

He frowns, unhappy that I’m not dropping everything for him. “Doing what?”

“Dinner with a friend,” I reply, omitting the fact it’s Mr. C’s mother and father I’m dining with. “But I am taking a week off so I’ll have so much time to bug you.”

“You don’t bug me,” he answers, pulling me in for another kiss. “I miss you.”

“I missed you too. I want to hear all about your trip.”

“You will, when you make time for me,” he jests and walks away backwards, still smiling. “I love you, Rose Sinclair.”

My cheeks flush when he yells that last part. I duck behind my desk, muttering curses at him.

“He is so sweet,” Miranda comments as she passes, eyeing him hungrily like she does Mr. C.

She always seems to appear behind me at the most inopportune moments.

I open the lid of the box on my desk after scoffing a few of the chocolates and laugh when I reveal the contents. It’s a really large T-shirt with Pax’s face on it. In bold above and below his goofy smiling face it says,

“TAKEN
BY THIS STUD”

“That’s disturbing,” Mr. C says, poking his head around the door.

I hug the T-shirt to my chest. “It’s amazing.”

“Disturbing,” he repeats and nods for me to follow.

My excitement has me counting to six and tapping my feet as I go. He throws a pencil at me; I catch it and smile smugly. “Nice try.”

He throws an eraser this time and it bounces off my forehead.

Ugh.

He just thinks he’s so hilarious.

Wait and see, Mr. Conti. Wait and see.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Seventeen

He's my friend.

"Are you ready?" I whisper to Maria. I picked her up from school thirty minutes ago with a plan of action in place.

"I am so ready," she whispers back, her gorgeous face set with determination.

"Good."

I push open the door and Maria announces in her usual cute and hyperactive way, "DADDY!"

He looks up from the folders on his desk, I check to make sure they're nothing important as he hugs his daughter and smiles at me, mouthing a thank you for bringing her.

I almost feel bad for the reason why I brought her before soccer practice.

"Maria, why don't you show Daddy the gift we got him?" I place her sparkly purple bag on the floor and we both crouch either side of it.

"You got me a gift?" he asks excitedly though it's exaggerated for his daughter. He doesn't normally speak like this.

"We did," I reply and his smile falters when he sees mine. "NOW!"

We both spring up, landing on our feet and pointing two cans each of silly string at the man behind his desk.

"Don't. You. Dare."

"GET HIM!" I yell with a laugh and we press the nozzles, shooting green, pink, orange, and yellow sticky string at him. The strands fly with a hiss through the air, hitting his hair, his face, his shoulders, his chest, some lands on his desk. Oh, this is going to be messy.

He covers his face with his hands until he's standing and then starts to chase his daughter around his office. There is silly string *everywhere.* I kind of like it though.

I get his back as she screams and scrambles under the table, the spry little thing that she is.

"You are so dead," he says to me, pointing at me but I just spray it at his finger.

He lunges for my laughing form, a huge smile on his face so I twist to keep the cans away from him but my strength is no match. Arms come around me, trapping me to his chest as I squirm for freedom, but he turns one of the cans and gets me right in the face, all over my glasses and hair. Just like on Christmas.

Maria charges, ready to defend my honor when Mr. C hurries, "There's twenty dollars in it if you switch teams!"

"WHAT?" I shriek and give Maria a pleading look as her father holds my arms behind me.

She shrugs her shoulders. "Sorry, Rose… it's twenty bucks."

I hold my breath when she shoots me directly in the face, much to the joy of her asshole father. Managing to wriggle my arms free, I turn and hide my face in his chest, clinging to his string-covered shirt for dear life.

"I'm out," Maria sighs, shaking the empty cans.

Mine ran out seconds after Ezra used them against me. Thank God.

We stand there panting, bodies humming from the high of the fight.

I lean back and remove my glasses, using the bottom of Mr. Conti's shirt to clean them. My knuckles graze the bare skin of his solid abdomen and heat shoots up my arm. I gulp and focus on cleaning them with minimal touching. While I'm doing so, he tips my head back with the side of his finger under my chin and forces me to focus on his face. He's blurry but I can make out the outline of his features for the most part. I see his lips open at the same time as mine.

"I don't think I've ever seen you without your glasses," he murmurs and the hand that tipped my head back curls around my cheek and ear. I shiver when his thumb strokes away a piece of string and his minty, sweet breath hits my lips. We're so close. Our bodies are flush with each other.

I can feel his heart beating in tandem with mine. His heat, his smell, the way he's gazing into my unfocused eyes…

It's like a drug. I feel high. I've never felt like this before.

"Daddy, I can't get it out of my hair," Maria calls from the bathroom, startling us both and breaking the moment.

I move away from him after putting my glasses back on and assist his daughter in the bathroom.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," I say, looking at the state of us both in the mirror. "It'll wash out."

"I can't go to soccer practice like this," she whines, frowning at herself, making her nostrils flare comically. "They'll all laugh at me."

"Probably," I reply and groan when she digs her elbow into my ribs. It doesn't hurt, it just makes me choke.

"Come on," Mr. C calls and then knocks on the door. "Let's go get

us all cleaned up and kick some Bentley school soccer baby butts."

"YEEEESSSSSS!" Maria cheers, arms in the air.

"You coming?" he asks me politely. "You can take a shower." When I hesitate, he quickly adds, "The house is empty. It'll just be us."

I know there was no hidden meaning to his words, but I can't help feeling it anyway. In my groin and down my thighs. Basically, all over my body.

"I shouldn't," I mutter, looking him up and down one last time. It's so easy to get lost in a man when he's as handsome as Mr. C. But I'm not about to put myself in a situation with him where I might make a fool of myself or either of us might…

I'm not even going to think about it.

"Can I meet you there?" I ask softly, turning back the way I came.

"You're going?" Maria cries.

"I won't be long." I leave before either of them can stop me, putting as much distance between me and them as possible.

"What the fuck?" Pax hisses, grabbing me as I exit and pulling me towards the elevators. My arm aches where he's squeezing it. "Do you really think it's okay that you're running around in another man's office screaming and laughing like that?"

I blink, surprised by the vehemence in his tone. I thought we were okay. He sulked and said it was weird when he found out I'd spent Christmas with Ezra's family, but accepted that it's not like he offered for me to go with him. "You're hurting me."

"Sorry," he mumbles and releases my arm. "I'm just saying that this isn't okay. You're mine, right? I'm yours?"

"We don't own each other."

"No, but you already spend enough time with your fucking boss."

"*Our* boss," I correct, keeping my voice low.

"You should have come to see me."

I gape at him. "I've been with you all week. You sound like a jealous idiot."

"And you sound like you're fucking Mr. Conti. Everybody says it and now they're definitely going to say it after that."

"Listen to what you just said. We were in there with a ten-year-old girl… his daughter… shooting silly string. Are you trying to say I'd have sex with my boss in front of his daughter?"

"No, but they don't know she's in there!"

"Lower your voice," I command, glaring at him. I point to myself. "Do I look like I've had sex with anybody? And if I was having an affair, I'd probably be going with them to his house to shower, instead I'm going to my house to shower." Then I shake my head. "I can't believe I'm even having to explain myself. This is my job. Maria is special to me. The Contis are my friends, *sorta*. Why do we keep

having this conversation? I've done nothing to earn your distrust."

I walk away before he can say anything else, leaving him seething with madness. I press the button for the elevator and step inside.

He joins me and pushes me into the wall. "I don't like it," he breathes, kissing my lips, keeping his foot in the elevator door so they don't close. "But I'll try not to give you hell about it. I know I've been driving us both crazy with it lately, it's just, the thought of you with anybody else sends me wild. I've never felt like this before. I hate it." Pulling more string from my hair after kissing me again he smiles and shakes his head. "You look ridiculous."

"I'm sorry I didn't come to see you first," I whisper, and I mean it. I would have probably been perturbed too if he came to the office on his day off and didn't bother to stop and say hello. "I'm new to this relationship stuff, you'll have to bear with me."

"I'll definitely *bare* with you later," he jests, flashing his eyes at me.

The clearing of a throat has us both straightening up. It's Mr. Conti and Maria. Maria is grinning from ear to ear, Mr. Conti is scowling like he has smelled something bad.

"Sorry, boss." Pax smirks, kissing my unresponsive lips once more. "Have you seen her? I can't get enough of her."

Laughing bashfully, I shove him out of the doors and Mr. C and Maria step inside.

"Is that your boyfriend?" Maria asks. "I didn't know you had a boyfriend."

"We've only been dating a little while," I reply, giving Mr. Conti the side eye because he still looks annoyed. "I'm sorry, sir… I know you don't like public displays at work but he's really… persuasive."

I thought he'd laugh and roll his eyes but he just silently seethes and I don't understand why.

I've said sorry, although this is probably the fourth time he's caught us making out where we're not supposed to.

"Am I forgiven?" I ask softly, reaching for the cuff of his jacket and giving it a little tug.

When the doors open, he doesn't look at me as he bites out, "Don't let it happen again, or next time it'll be your job."

My heart stops and my hands start trembling.

"See you soon," Maria calls when he pulls her out of the elevator, reminding me that I still have to meet with them soon despite the fact he's a complete ass.

Although I suppose he's just treating me how he'd treat any other employee. I must respect that. Just because we're friendly doesn't mean he can be lax.

I watch him walk away with Maria skipping along beside him.

At soccer practice less than two hours later I sit at the end of the bleachers furthest away from him. He smiles and cheers his daughter on, and I wonder why I bothered coming at all, but then I remember how upset Maria would be if I didn't show up.

I'm too nice. But I guess I'm just clinging on to a family that I never had. Maria represents a childhood for me that I always wanted and never got. I'm living vicariously through her all the while trying to make hers a little more memorable too.

Pax: Where are you?

Rose: Maria's soccer practice.

Pax: What time will you be home?

"Tell him late, we're getting pizza and ice cream."

I startle, almost jumping out of my seat because I have no idea when he appeared next to me. "I'm not coming for pizza and ice cream."

He smiles at me and I notice the eyes of the parents around us gauging our interactions. I shuffle to the left, putting a foot of distance between us. His smile doesn't fade so I know he's not offended. "Do I smell?"

"Yes," I lie… well… a kind of lie. If he asks me how he smells I won't be able to say bad.

Chuckling he leans in. "What do I smell of?"

"Stop it, people are looking," I hiss, giving him a wide-eyed *"back off"* look.

He scans the people around us and then shrugs. "So?"

"So most of these people know your wife directly."

"Again… So? Are we doing something wrong?"

Are we? "No… I just don't want to give them any ammunition."

He claps when everybody else claps but he's not watching the game anymore than I am, so he has no idea what he's clapping for.

I look back at my phone and reply to Pax.

Rose: I don't know.

Pax: Is he there? Are you with him right now?

"A little paranoid, isn't he?"

I turn my phone away. "Don't read my text messages."

"Don't open them beside me then."

I gape at him. “You’re so rude.”

He smiles like the cat that got the cream but only until his next question when he looks concerned, wary almost. “How are things going with Pax? You’ve been a bit… forlorn since you got back together a few weeks ago.”

“I feel like… if I talk about it with you it’ll betray him.”

“I’m guessing I’m the catalyst then?”

I nod, peering up at him. “We’re friends, right?”

“Of course.”

“So, you promise me you won’t say anything? You’ll just listen and offer me advice or something?”

His smile is kind and warm and everything I love about him. *Like*, not love. “Of course.”

My fingers tap against my knee. “He thinks we’re *you know* and… well… it’s making him paranoid,” I admit.

“What exactly is, *you know*?”

I want to flick him on the nose. “You know what it is.”

“Not sure I do.” His smile is just getting bigger and more mischievous by the second. Sometimes I find it hard to believe he’s almost thirty-eight. He certainly doesn’t act it. “You’ll have to tell me.”

“You’re an ass,” I grumble, looking ahead again. “You know what I mean…”

“Eating sandwiches?”

I discreetly pinch his outer thigh; he yelps and lifts his leg a bit to get me to stop.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t stop. “Baking cakes?” And then he leans into my ear and whispers softly, “Thinking of the number six?”

A chill runs down my spine and my eyes ping wide open. My breath shoots into my lungs with a sharp inhale that makes me feel dizzy.

I can’t tear my eyes away from his and his smile just stays in place.

The referee blows his whistle, breaking the connection.

He was definitely flirting with me then… or he’s just being banter rude or something, because… *fuck*.

Mr. Conti breaks the silence but I still can’t breathe. “Want me to have a word?”

“NO!” I blurt grabbing his arm. “Please don’t.”

He looks down at where my hand is gripping him and nods to the crowd. “That’s going to give them something to talk about.”

I release him immediately and he just smiles that smug, happy smile again. Is he happy that my relationship has become hell on earth? Or is he just really enjoying, tormenting me?

Wiping his hands on his thighs, he says quietly, “Okay, as far as

I'm concerned, I know nothing. So, tell me about it. What's going on?"

When I'm satisfied that he's not about to spill my secrets I continue with a slight sneer. "He keeps telling me I have to quit my job or he's going to leave me."

He tenses by my side and I keep my eyes on the field, waving at Maria when she looks my way. "That's not okay."

"No, you're right, it isn't, but I've been considering it just to keep the peace." Before he can argue I look at him, eyes filling with tears. "But then all I can think of is five months from now when I'm working with another man and he's upset about him too. Am I expected to keep changing my life to fit his paranoid narrative?"

"Absolutely not. Don't give in to him. Break up with him. That's…" He shakes his head, looking at me like I'm crazy. "*No*. You're not leaving me because some guy told you to."

Not leaving *him*?

"Like you can talk," I jest, nudging his shoulder with mine, somehow, we have shifted closer together again, like magnets. Unaware magnets. Unaware magnets with touching thighs. My God why am I burning? "If I was any prettier you never would have hired me."

His eyes scan my face, an incredulous look on his. "You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?"

My breath catches in my throat.

He just said that.

"Now I know you're pulling my dick," I reply, taking his words for what they were, banter and nothing else. I imagined the heated look in his eyes and the earnestness in his tone.

I go back to my phone.

Pax: Is he there?

"Lie. Tell him I'm not."

I bite my lip then let it ping free. "I can't stand liars. I don't want to become one."

"If it'll keep the peace," he murmurs, leaning in even closer.

I raise my brows. "Is that how you keep the peace with your wife? By lying?"

He shakes his head. "No. I never have anything interesting to lie about."

"I don't want to be a liar."

"I don't want to be the one to tell you this, but if you're having to resort to even the idea of lying to escape the hell you'll face at home, your relationship is becoming toxic."

Ugh. He's right and I hate that. "I love him, Ezra."

Something flashes in his eyes. Pain? Is he sad that I'm so sad?

"Why does it have to be this way?"

"Relationships are supposed to make life better, not worse. Your happiness is so important. Don't let him jeopardize that."

I nod. "You're right. I know you are. I've been thinking about it for a while. Things just aren't the same between us anymore."

"Then you know what to do."

"I do," I murmur and smile sadly with glistening eyes. "I could really use a hug right now."

"That would definitely get some tongues wagging," he whispers, his tone humorous to lighten the mood.

"Exactly, so don't touch me."

"I would if I could." His voice is a low murmur and I can't decide if he means that he would touch me if he could or if he would hug me if he could.

Le sigh.

What a confusing web my mind has woven.

Pax: ARE YOU WITH HIM?

"That's not okay," Mr. C says as we both stare at my phone. "It's not normal."

"I'll deal with it."

Rose: Yes, I am.

We look at each other, communicating without words.

He's right. I need to handle Pax before things get real.

Just not right now.

I'll give him just a bit more time to calm down.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eighteen

He gives it to me straight.

I am so groggy and so dopey right now. My tongue feels like a foot and my feet feel like sand.

Getting laser eye surgery was fucking terrifying, they had to give me a sedative. I don't know how much but I am spaaaaced.

A rare occurrence for them but I wouldn't stop twitching. Now I'm being guided home with sunglasses over my eyes, unable to see a thing beyond a blurry haze of sepia things.

My eyes hurt.

Laurie is my carer and friend as always, though her tics mean she keeps accidentally pushing me away from her and then pulling me back. I giggle because it's funny but also, I just giggle because it's funny.

"Step down," she says, and I do so.

This is awkward. I don't like it but I can't wait to see without the need for glasses.

I've been told before to get the surgery before my eyes got too bad, but I always loved my glasses. I loved having them as a sort of shield to hide behind. It's weird, I know. I'm weird.

"Okay, we're going to get in the car now," Laurie tells me and I hear somebody approach us.

"There we go," a kind lady soothes, and puts her hand on my head as I duck into the vehicle. "I know you told me not to bother but——"

"She showed up anyway and said either she can drive, or we can get a cab. I chose the nice lady who drives. She smells like strawberries."

"Right?" I agree, giggling drunkenly. She really does smell like strawberries.

"They had to sedate her to stop her from twitching so she's a bit out of it," Laurie explains as I try to hug the nice lady.

"You really do smell like strawberries and I really am glad you're here." I hiccup. "Who are you?"

"It's Izabella, sweet girl," she says, closing the door.

“Yay, I really like Izabella.”

Laurie giggles from somewhere ahead.

“They approached me while you were under, Rose, so cute of them, right?” Laurie continues but I don’t know what she’s talking about.

I slump on the back seat of the car and the back of my head hits warm thighs.

“Hello, stranger,” I say, blinking to uncloud my vision but it doesn’t work. My eyes feel so dry and burnie. “Whose head is my lap in?”

“Mine.”

“That’s funny, you sound just like my boss.”

Laurie and Izabella both start to laugh as though I’m hysterical. I’m perfectly normal, thank you very much.

“I do, do I?”

“It’s weird, stop talking.”

They laugh again. “Maybe I don’t want to.”

I close my eyes and turn towards him. “You smell like him too.”

“I wonder why that is,” Laurie calls, laughing even harder now.

“Laurie,” I reach towards her with my hand and put it on her face when she comes closer. “Shhhhh.”

She grumbles under her breath as the others snigger.

What’s so funny?

“Can we listen to music?” I ask happily, my words sound a bit slow and weird.

“What station?”

“Any.”

The beat of a drum starts and then a guitar. I don’t know what this is but I want to dance to it.

“Please stop,” the man begs, placing his hand on my forehead and holding me down.

“Why?”

“Keep doing that and you’ll find out,” he breathes.

Giggling, I close my eyes again and yawn loudly. “I’m so fucking tired.”

“Language,” Laurie admonishes.

“Sus kesisine,” I bark back. “*Shut up.*”

The man beneath me starts laughing. “What language was that?”

“Turkish I think, maybe,” Izabella replies.

The man beneath me trails a finger along my jaw. “You speak Turkish?”

“Hayir,” I reply.

“She said no,” Laurie explains, laughing even harder now.

“You don’t speak Turkish but you’re speaking Turkish,” the man

comments, still trailing his finger along my jaw.

"Ben hastayim. Beni yalniz birak." *"I'm sick. Leave me alone."*

"What did she say that time?" Izabella asks.

"I don't know, I don't speak Turkish. I only know what no is because she says it to me sometimes."

"How does *she* speak Turkish?" the man asks, shuffling in his seat.

I put my hand on his face too like I did to Laurie. "Shhhh."

He chuckles against my palm and kisses it gently before placing it back on my chest.

"Ooooooooooo," I hum and flick his lower lip down with the tip of my finger.

He puts my hand back on my chest.

"Ooooooooooooo," I hum again and try to put my finger up his nose.

Laurie starts laughing so hard it becomes silent. "I'm totally recording this just so you all know."

"Ooooooooooooo," I hum… *again*, and go for his lip again.

He bites my finger, holding it between his teeth. That hurts. My mouth opens as I try to pull my finger free.

"Ouch."

He releases me, kisses the finger he just bit and places it back on my chest.

"Ooooooooo." I try his ear.

"Will you stop?" he says around his body-shaking laughter. "I should never have come."

"Yep, she's going to be mortified when she sobers up," Laurie answers, sounding way too happy.

"And yet you're recording her anyway."

"Duh? What else are friends for?"

"Not orgasms. Friends can't give you those," I point out because it's a really important fact that needs to be said.

"Let's not talk about orgasms in front of your boss and his mom, okay?" Laurie pats my arm.

I kick off my shoes and put my feet onto the leather seat.

"You're no fun," I grumble, pouting and relaxing on whoever is stroking my hair right now.

"COTTON CANDY ORGASMS AND YOUR LOCAL ALCOHOLIC!" Laurie yells and then sighs at herself. "Sorry, Mrs. Conti. I'm really trying not to."

"You let it out, dear." Izabella is such a nice lady.

"I'm going to keep you," I say reaching for Izabella's shoulder. "Forever."

"Okay, sweet girl."

I turn towards the man, smiling when he squirms beneath me and

order, “Stop fidgeting.”

“You stop fidgeting,” he returns, placing his hand on my head again.

“That’s not me, it’s the car.”

He chuckles and strokes my jaw again, that feels so nice. “Try to sleep.”

“Mmm-kay.”

When he stops stroking me for whatever reason, I grab his hand and make it do the same motion on my cheek. He continues what he was doing, tickling my jaw, my ear, my hair, my throat, my chest. It burns in the nicest way.

I squirm, trying to relax but it feels so good I don’t want to relax.

“My eyes hurt,” I mumble.

“I know.”

“You really do sound like my boss.”

“I know.”

“You could have so much fun with this,” Laurie says. “I’d be asking her all kinds of questions about myself if she didn’t recognize me.”

“Don’t you dare,” Izabella tells the car, her tone firm. “You let her private thoughts be her own.”

“Just one little question,” Laurie begs.

“No, not one.”

The man shifts. I wish he’d stop doing that. “Is your boss nice?”

“Stop it right now or I’m pulling over.”

“My boss?” I ask around a yawn.

“Is he a good boss?”

“He pays for my bagels.”

“Stop it, Ezra.”

I hold on to a solid arm and hug it to my body as the car rocks my body back and forth every time it hastens and slows.

“Is he nice to you?” Laurie asks and I hear a slapping sound. “Ouch.”

I giggle and hold the arm tighter.

“Do you like him?” These words are whispered so quietly it tickles my eardrum.

“He’s amazing. I want to keep him too.”

The arm I’m squeezing squeezes me back.

“Are we at the bar yet? I need another drink.”

“Thank you so much for the ride and for helping me get her inside,” Laurie says. I can hear her through my bedroom door.

My eyes are sore.

I roll onto my side and keep them shut.

I don’t feel as groggy as I did but I do need sleep. Lots and lots of

sleep.

"I'll just be out here if you need me," Laurie whispers through the door, tapping on it gently.

"Love you," I respond genuinely.

I'm not totally sure how I got home but she got me home safe and I am so grateful. My best friend is the bestest friend in the whole world.

Pax joins me hours later when he finishes work, taking over from Laurie. He curls his body around mine and whispers sweet things in my ear until I drift back to sleep.

When I wake up again the sun is shining through the curtains. It doesn't hurt my eyes like I thought it would and my vision is a bit shaky but already it's clearer than what it was. I was blind as a bat before but now I can see the edge of the drapes and the pattern and I'm not even wearing my glasses.

I'm mesmerized by it.

I roll over onto Pax and kiss his jaw and admire how attractive he is.

"Hey, sleepy," he whispers. The room is a dull gray from the lack of light, but I can just make out his soft features. "How are you feeling?"

"Excited. I can't wait to see. I can't remember a time I ever *could* see."

"I bet," he replies, kissing the tip of my nose. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up."

He wasn't? I vaguely remember being with a man. I just assumed it was him. "It's okay. Laurie sorted me out."

"If I'd had more notice…"

"I know." I stroke his cheek and close my eyes. "I understand."

The decision to get laser eye surgery was one I just thought about, clicked my fingers, and booked myself in for during my leave from work. I've been putting it off for years, so I don't know why I'm suddenly ready now but I'm glad it's done.

"Hungry?" he asks, and I nod. "What are you craving? Just say the word and it's yours."

I remember a week ago when I had that conversation with Ezra at the soccer game about Pax and now I'm realizing how much I jumped the gun. He might have been getting a bit paranoid but true to his word he's backed off and look how sweet he's being to me.

He's always there, I have to remember that. He deserves better from me than how I've been treating him behind his back.

"Mexican. I want all that meat in my mouth."

He growls playfully. "I've got some meat for your mouth."

Laughing, I press my cheek to his chest and sigh. "I love you."

“I love you too,” he replies, kissing my hair.

I tickle a pattern on his skin, spelling my name and then his with the tip of my finger.

“I feel like I’m about to become a new me,” I say quietly.

“I bet. I mean really this is a huge change. I can’t remember ever seeing you without your glasses.” His hand threads through my hair. “Maybe you should reinvent my style? Finally start wearing clothes that fit?”

I tense. “I like my clothes.”

“I know, but new year, new you, right?”

“I suppose I could try some,” I respond flatly. “I don’t really want to change myself though.”

“You’re twenty-four but most people think you’re a nineteen-year-old intern.”

I cringe because he’s right about that. Every time I go to another floor for something for Mr. C, somebody stops me and asks me to get them coffee or to photocopy something. Though most people know me by now, there are always new people to meet, this is such a huge building and none of them take me seriously.

Saying that though, I am the go-to person these days for anything happening in the office. Nobody even bothers with Mr. Conti anymore because I run it all. I sort out their leave and their personal days, I send their work to the right people and choose what pitches to put through to Ezra. I love my job. I miss it already.

“I’m not saying it to hurt you, I love the way you dress. I love how different you are. But maybe it’s time to stand out a bit? You might end up with a better job offer.”

“And we’re back to that,” I sigh, trying to roll away from him but he holds me in place.

“I just don’t think you get paid enough for all that you do.”

“I’m happy with my salary,” I comment tiredly. “And I get to travel.”

He doesn’t say anything else on the topic and for that I’m glad. He kisses me and leaves to get us both some breakfast, knowing I was just kidding about the Mexican food at eight in the morning.

He returns forty minutes later with pancakes, eggs, bacon, and syrup.

It’s a lot fattier than I’d normally like for a breakfast but it tastes so yummy I don’t care.

I check my phone while I’m eating, squinting to see the screen. My mouth chews a piece of pancake and syrupy bacon. I hum happily.

Mr. C: How are you feeling today?

Rose: Tired but good. Just eating pancakes and bacon covered in syrup.

Mr. C: Sounds like an excellent breakfast. How was your journey home yesterday?

Rose: If I remembered, I'd tell you. Why do you ask?

Mr. C: No reason.
Mr. C: ooooooooooooooo

Rose: Ooooooooooo???? What's that?

Mr. C: Phone glitch. Maria is asking for you. She said she misses you.

Rose: I miss her more. How's work?

Mr. C: Suffering without you but managing. Focus on resting, not on working.

Rose: It's only the second day of my annual leave and I'm already bored.

Mr. C: You work too much. Enjoy the break. I know I will when I have mine.

Rose: Can I run the office? I want to tell everybody what to do.

Mr. C: I was speaking to my sister about that just this morning. I think you know my job better than anybody else, so it would make sense. We'll talk about it when you're back. I don't have any plans to go anywhere just yet.

Rose: Can you come in on your day off and be my PA instead? CONTI… fetch me a bagel.

Mr. C: Absolutely. I'll sit there tapping my fingers, murmuring numbers, rocking in my chair, and drink all the coffee in the building.

Rose: Is that what you think I do all day?

I know he's just teasing me, but I can't resist playing along.

Mr. C: That and sneaking off with your boyfriend for quickies in his office.

Rose: This just took a mortifying turn. I have not done that and will not do that since you threatened my job in the elevator.

Mr. C: You'd choose your job over nookie?

Rose: Depends how good the nookie is.

Mr. C: That sounded like a dig at Pax's abilities in the bedroom.

Rose: THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT! This conversation is over.

Mr. C: Like your quickies in his office.

Rose: I'm never texting you again.

Mr. C: You have to. I'm your boss.

Rose: Then I quit.

Mr. C: Suuuuure you do. See you in a week… and no more silly string. I'm still finding it everywhere despite the fact you had my office cleaned three times.

Rose: I told you to let me clean it. You wouldn't be finding any if I'd done it.

Mr. C: That's not your job.

Rose: It was my mess.

Mr. C: It was OUR mess.

Rose: Let's just blame it on Maria and call it a day.

Mr. C: Agreed.

I put my phone down, still beaming. I can't wipe the smile from my face.

"Who was that?" Pax asks me for the third time. I had my mouthful, I used that as an excuse to not reply.

"Mr. Conti," I say and jolt when he slams his knife down on the table.

"Never seen somebody so happy messaging their boss before."

"Don't start," I warn, and he glares at me. "I mean it. Don't."

He stands, pushing his chair back so harshly it almost tips over. "I'm going for a walk."

"You do that," I reply, feeling a headache brewing in my skull.

He storms out of my house leaving me to clean up the breakfast plates. Not that I mind the latter part. Cleaning will take my mind off this asshole.

I also brave the light and open all the curtains. When I look out of the window I want to cry. My eyes don't hurt, and they keep blurring in and out… but I can see everything. Absolutely everything.

I have a flowerbox beneath my window, and I can see beads of moisture on the leaves from the light shower of rain we had this morning. I can see the lines in the road, and I can read the words on the bus stop opposite the steps leading up to my neighbor's house. I couldn't even see those with my glasses. My eyesight was seriously bad before. I didn't realize just how bad.

I call Laurie, fighting the urge to cry, but she doesn't answer. She's probably at work so I call somebody else instead.

Somebody I probably shouldn't be calling…

"Is it weird that I'm crying because I can see everything? Well… I'm not crying but I really want to."

"Is the world a beautiful place?" he asks, a smile in his voice.

"It's better than I imagined. I just… I can read words from far away. My head is hurting because of all of this new information it's trying to store."

"Take it easy. Don't overdo it."

I smile, leaning out of the window to see further down the street. "I've been blind for so long… I feel like a new person."

"Don't change too much. We all like you just how you are."

"Thanks, Mr. C."

"Ezra," he corrects.

"I'll see you in a week," I reply, smiling too.

"See you in a week."

I disconnect the call and head for a shower. I'm going on a walk.

Pax returns while I'm washing and decides he wants to join me. His bad mood gone. We make love against the shower wall.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nineteen

He's always there when I need him.

The week can't end quick enough. True to my word, I have changed my style. Pax helped me clear out my wardrobe until there was nearly nothing left and then we went shopping together. Choosing more womanly suits for work, skinny jeans, waist-high pants, dresses for outside of work. My closet no longer has any trace left of the old me.

It was sad. I cried. I kept my purple suit and some pajamas and that's it. We donated the rest to a thrift store, or Pax did. I stayed home and kept crying.

It's for the best, Pax is right, I'm getting older now and I need to be taken more seriously.

And now I'm getting my hair done with Laurie by my side. We're having a girls' day. Hair and then makeup, though the latter is purely so I can learn how to apply more than just a lick of mascara to my lashes.

I'm not about to start using highlighter but I'd like to start being able to do my brows and put a bit of shading on my eyelids. Now that I actually have eyes.

"You look so weird," Laurie tells me as the lady behind me snips into my thick, burgundy hair.

"Good weird or bad weird?"

"You look hot as fuck, but… you just don't look like you anymore."

I shrug my shoulders. "That's kind of the point."

"Whose point? I thought you were happy as you were?"

I look at my friend in the mirror, she's in the chair beside me, her red hair in foils. She's getting hers lightened.

"I was, but I need to start getting more serious. We're not getting any younger and I really want to be respected."

She laughs harshly. "Respected? Because of how you look?"

"That's how it works."

"But… you're already respected."

"No, I'm not… people treat me like a naïve teenager. They say

mean shit about me all the time and think I'm an intern. The whole point was to be invisible and instead I was the joke of the office."

Laurie looks incredulously at me. "And Pax told you that, I'm assuming?"

"I heard it myself, you know I did."

"And you don't think people will say anything now? You're a knockout, you're gorgeous… you've gone from pauper to model… you don't think people are going to notice?"

She's right… I should have done this gradually. "I'm dreading work tomorrow, don't make this harder for me."

"I bet you are. Nobody is going to recognize you." She reaches for my hand and I extend mine to her too. We can't quite touch each other so we tickle the ends of our fingers together and giggle. "You were beautiful then and you're beautiful now… just don't lose sight of who you are. Especially not for a guy."

"Amen, sister," the woman cutting my hair says and then bumps knuckles with my best friend.

"There's no going back now anyway," I murmur. "I got rid of everything."

"You look amazing," the lady who just bumped knuckles with my best friend says. "And when I'm done with your hair, you're going to look even more amazing."

I smile at her, watching her snip at my newly colored wavy black hair like the pro she is.

To say Pax approves of my new look would be an understatement. He hasn't left me alone since I arrived at his apartment yesterday with colored thick waves, trimmed to my shoulder blades, and my body encased in waist-high jeans that are baggy on the leg, and a pink crop top that hugs my breasts. He peeled me out of my clothes faster than I put them on.

I don't even own a pair of cotton panties anymore except a packet for my period week. The rest of my things are all matching and, to be honest, I do feel really sexy under my clothes. I'm wearing a new pantsuit that fits me like a glove. Even the jacket cinches in at the waist, but underneath I've got on a black corset-style bra that zips in the middle, and matching panties. And even though nobody can see it I feel powerful somehow, sexier. I don't particularly like the feeling. It's a new feeling.

I almost turn back and put on the dark purple suit Ezra got me for Christmas but I know I need to get a grip and get over it.

I'm a lot earlier than usual but I need to check my desk and make

sure everything is still in its place or I'll be cutting into paid office time to do it and I imagine I'll have a lot to deal with and catch up on today.

With my tablet resting on my arm, I head into the building and make a beeline for the elevator, keeping my head down as I go.

Mr. Conti steps in before me, I hadn't realized I was hot on his heels I was too busy connecting to the company WI-FI.

"Morning," I singsong, hoping he doesn't look at me too hard.

He glances at me as I stand by his side in the empty elevator.

"Morning." Not his usual cheery greeting. I was hoping for a bit more than that seeing as I've been off all week.

"My desk better not have been touched," I comment, and he turns his head and does a slow blink. "I'm not afraid to cut you."

He gapes at me, his lips slightly parted as he does the one thing I didn't want him to do. "You… you're wearing… I didn't recognize you."

I shift on the spot as the elevator doors open and then hurry through them.

"Do I look bad?" I ask as I power on ahead, stopping to laugh when I see yellow police tape all around my desk. Forgetting my question, I grin at him over my shoulder and find him still looking at me with that look of bewilderment on his face. "Did you do this?"

"I wouldn't want to get cut," he comments, still looking me up and down.

"Will you stop looking at me like that?" I whine and smack his arm.

He feigns injury, back to his old playful self and I follow him into his office. I take in the files scattered across the coffee table and the backwards binders on the shelf. "It's good to have you back."

I can see that. What did he do while I was gone? Nothing is organized. So glad I came in early.

"And I don't look stupid?"

He stops and turns my way as the door clicks shut behind me.

His gray eyes linger on mine and I jump when he pushes a strand of my black hair behind my ear, a tender touch, so sweet and soft. It leaves a burning trail across my skin. "You could *never* look stupid."

"I can see every fleck of color in your eyes," I breathe, leaning closer and trying to count the shards of darker gray that cut through the ring of lighter gray.

He holds his breath and nibbles slightly on his lower lip as I stare into his eyes like a weirdo.

"What are you doing?" he asks, and I put my finger to his soft lips. He pulls it away and absentmindedly kisses the palm. "Wait… are you counting?"

I inhale sharply and immediately stop. “No. Not at all. I don’t count. Who does that?”

“You were counting.”

“Was not.”

“Was too.”

“I wasn’t.” *I so was*.

He raises a brow, lips twitching with amusement, hands searching in his pockets.

I squeak and race from the room before he can throw anything at me.

Then… when I get to my desk, I realize something…

Mr. Conti kissed my hand. I look at the space that still tingles from his lips and touch it with the tips of my fingers.

Shaking my head, I rid myself of any thoughts of my boss and his lips on my body and get on with my work. It’s going to be a long day.

Pax comes in an hour later, kissing my hair and commenting on how nice I look. I usher him on, scared to get caught being too close to him and I don’t see him again until his scheduled meeting with Mr. Conti just before lunch.

He winks at me as he passes and then shuts the door behind him. I work on, keeping my head down and busy until Pax leaves and takes me for bagels at a deli down the street.

“What have people said about your new look?”

“Nobody recognizes me,” I comment, smiling around a mouthful of beef, bagel, and mustard. “I went to the gym before work this morning and they almost didn’t let me in because of my lack of glasses. I didn’t realize how much they defined my features.”

“We’re able to make actual eye contact while we fuck now,” he jests making me laugh. “Instead of you just looking up at a blur of handsome features.”

“This is true.” My eyes are amazing now, I can just see so many things. It’s mesmerizing to me. I hope I never get tired of it.

I finish my lunch chatting and laughing with the man who shares my bed every night, but as is regular these days, his demeanor changes when I go back to the counter to order Mr. C’s lunch to go. Something I do almost every day, or whenever he asks. It’s my job even though I’d probably do it even if it wasn’t.

But then I’ve noticed that Pax is just a very jealous guy in general. All we have done on my week off is fight because now I’m actually dressed nice, if I even look at another man funny it’s *disrespectful* to my boyfriend. Aka Pax.

Because I don’t see how desirable I am. Which is ironic because that’s how he wanted me, isn’t it?

It's getting tiring.

I've had enough.

At the end of the day, the way I see it is I don't need him in my life to be happy. I was perfectly content before he came along. And now I'm all powerful with my secret sexy underwear, I have the confidence to tell him to fuck off if I must.

Okay, so I have the confidence anyway, but the underwear helps.

"It's just really fucking disrespectful," he goes on, in front of the entire deli while I take the paper bag of food from the barista guy. Even the guy behind the counter looks exhausted by him. Especially when he drags him into it. "Don't you agree, as a guy?"

"I'm just here to work, sir," the guy replies, and I mouth a sorry.

Pax keeps yapping at me as we walk but I'm no longer listening. I'm so over this conversation and I have been forever.

I wish we'd never started dating. I've never wished that before.

I've spoken to Izabella about this too because she's older and wiser and she told me that Pax is sucking the life right out of me. I'm starting to think she's right. How can such a handsome and charming guy be so high-maintenance?

He even fired Julia and hired a male receptionist so that I'd quit my job. He seemed to think that if he did that I'd go and work for him because I'm his girlfriend, or at the very least leave Ezra. I laughed it off and to say he got mad is an understatement.

His behavior is becoming alarming. It's an everyday thing now.

I'm so done.

He continues yelling as we walk through the office building and into the elevator. He calls me ignorant and tells me over and over how I should see things from his point of view.

"I just don't understand why you think you need——"

I snap, this is it. I'm done. I'm so done.

I place the deli bag on my desk and turn so sharply on Pax I startle him into silence.

"I'm breaking up with you," I say simply, and he blinks slowly at me.

"Excuse me."

"I'm done. It's over."

He laughs humorlessly, looking around to be sure that nobody is looking or listening. "You can't be serious… you're breaking up with me? Why? Because suddenly you're sexy so you think you're hot shit?"

"No, because you're an absolute dick and you don't make me happy anymore," I reply angrily. "I'm sick and tired of having the same fucking argument every single day. I'm sick of hearing you whine and moan and bitch and God… I just… I don't want this

anymore so please leave me alone."

"You love me. You're not going to leave me."

"Love you?" I laugh humorlessly. "I don't even *like* you anymore. That trumps any feelings of love I have for you. Just find somebody else to verbally abuse, that's not going to be me anymore."

"You're choosing *him* over me?" His blue eyes are wild with hurt pride and disgust. "He's married. You're nothing but a fucking whore."

I gasp when he grabs Mr. Conti's sandwich from my desk and stomps on it until the paper is ripped and there's bagel all over the ground and mayonnaise smushed into the wooden floor amongst other things.

I don't say anything else; I met a few guys who reacted like this back in foster care, it didn't end well for the people around them.

He stalks away to his office and I don't realize until I'm about to pick up the crushed bagel that Mr. C is in the hall with me.

"Leave it," he insists, taking my hands before I can pick it up. We stand together and he guides me into his office, his gray eyes swimming with concern. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Your hands are shaking." He takes them both in his again. "Does he often react like that with you?"

"Not with me…" I've seen him throw tantrums over other things with other people but not like that.

His eyes wash over me and he rubs my arms with strong palms. "Are you frightened of him?"

"I wasn't but…" I bite on my lip. "I'm sorry, this shouldn't be happening, but he just doesn't know when to stop. He goes on and on and on and it doesn't matter where we are or who we're with. You know?"

"I know, I've seen him on a rampage myself. He's very argumentative."

"I'm just tired of it," I mutter, wishing I could rub my eyes but *mascara*. "So tired. I don't have the energy to spend fighting with him anymore."

"Do you need a hug?" he asks, his face set with a silly boyish smile, his arms wide.

I consider it, remembering our Christmas embrace, the one where he pressed his whole body to mine, how he inhaled my hair like it was his favorite scent in the world.

How I want so badly to feel that again.

"I'm okay," I respond, feeling my cheeks heat at the memory.

He lets his arms drop to his sides and a look of rejection passes across his face, but it vanishes as quickly as it came. "Just let me know if he bothers you at all, okay?"

“Thanks, *boss*,” I say, adding extra emphasis to the word boss, hoping he understands why I can’t hug him. I really wish I had though.

He gives amazing hugs.

“You got it, Ms. Sinclair,” he replies, his smile gone.

I return to my desk, pushing the look of rejection out of my head. He didn’t mean anything by it. Did he?

My speaker buzzes, I hold on to the button and speak, “Yes, boss?”

“Book us a flight for New York City.”

“No problem, when for?”

“Thursday.”

“Time?”

“Any, the meeting isn’t until the following day.”

“What meeting am I preparing for?”

His line crackles as he moves around and his chair squeaks loudly. “A representative from the Japanese company Denki No Corp. They’re emailing me the details shortly. This could be our biggest client of our lives. If we get them, we’re talking a billion-dollar purchase and a very nice Christmas bonus for you.”

“Whoa.”

“Yep.”

“Shame we don’t have to go to Japan. That would have been awesome.”

“Agreed. But they need to see our best tech at work.”

I smile, feeling excited. “Well, I’ll get WhyTech NYC to get their asses in gear.”

“Thank you, Ms. Sinclair.”

“It’s Rose. Stop being a child,” I reply and release the button, effectively cutting him off.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty

He doesn't care how I look.

Rose: He put flowers and chocolates all over my desk again and won't leave me alone. He's just not relenting.

Laurie: Seriously? GET THE MESSAGE, DICKWEED! SHE'S NOT INTERESTED!

Rose: I'm sure he heard you just fine. All those caps.

Laurie: I wanted to do my part.

Rose: You always nail it.

Laurie: I think so too. Shall we Netflix and chill later?

Rose: Yes. That would be a great distraction. Your place or mine?

Laurie: Epic, I'll come to yours with pizza.

Rose: Fabulous.

It has been just three days since I broke up with Pax and like NYE he is not slowing down. He won't stop calling me and texting me.

He approaches me at work so much I've had to start working inside Mr. Conti's office. And then he started texting me accusing me of fucking him, so I opened the blinds just to get him off my case.

I haven't spoken to Mr. C about the texts, but he has seen the everyday gifts. I don't want to bother him with my drama that shouldn't have been brought to the workplace at all.

It's sweet but I'm just not into it anymore. I genuinely don't want

to be with him anymore. It's just too stressful. Relationships shouldn't be hell from what I've seen of them. Take the Contis, for example, both generations, they're all in stable happy homes where they cherish and respect each other.

That's what I want, stability and happiness and a man who is a grown-up and understands that I have a life outside of him.

My workday finishes and I grab a couple of bottles of wine on my way home, startled to find Pax waiting for me on the steps leading up to my door. He's sitting on the second step up, his head in his hands slumped forward over his knees.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, stopping by my car, keys in hand. Something doesn't feel right about this. I don't like it.

He looks at me with swollen eyes and an unsteady gaze.

"I need to speak to you," he says, standing. I had wondered if he's been drinking due to the hazy look in his eyes but he's coherent enough that I think he might just be a bit upset.

"I don't think there's anything left to be said." I stay where I am, not wanting to pass him.

How could such a passionate man become my enemy. Three weeks ago, I was smitten, and even though I still care about him, with how he's been recently I can now only say he makes me nervous.

I want to hug him and make him better if I didn't think he might hurt me.

"That's bullshit," he cries, sounding like a whiny teenage boy and not the grown, accomplished man that he is. "I love you. This isn't fair."

"You called me a whore and accused me of sleeping with my boss. Of course it's fair."

He looks at the bag in my hand and sees the neck of the two bottles of wine peeking out of the top. "Since when do you drink wine?"

"Since Izabella," I reply and it's the truth. Izabella introduced me to the wonderful joys of drinking certain wines with certain foods in certain companies. I think I've had dinner with her more times than she has her own kids over the past few weeks.

Although she did convince Mr. C and me a couple of weeks ago and we all went to a fancy place around the corner on our lunch hour, taking an extra hour to appease his mother who gushed over how nice it was to see us.

She's such a wonderful person.

"Cunti's mom? Don't you think it's weird that you hang out with his mom so much?"

"No, she's my friend."

I step back when he takes a step towards me.

"I'd have lunch with your mom if she ever knew I existed."

"She does know you exist," he insists, his eyes wide with hope. "She wants to meet you. If we just go back to how things were…"

"No."

"Please, just one more chance," he begs, lowering his voice when a young couple walk between us.

When they are out of earshot, he prowls closer, eyes on me, lips a grim line.

"I said no," I repeat, pulling open my car door. "Please just leave me alone."

"It's not fair. I said I was sorry…"

"You didn't actually, but even if you did, I won't accept, not this time. I've forgiven you for too much lately."

He stalks away from me, hands clenched into fists by his sides. I race to my door, heart pounding and head spinning. I fumble with the key in the lock and don't fully start to breathe again until I'm safe inside with the chain on the door.

I don't know what it is about this new version of him that terrifies me, but something in my soul is screaming at me to stay away. He makes all the hair on my body stand on edge.

Rose: Guess who I just found on my doorstep less than a day after calling me a whore?

Laurie: No fucking way?!?!?!?!? He's tenacious. Are you going to give him another chance?

Rose: No. He scares me.

Laurie: Want me to bring a baseball bat?

Rose: No. It's not that dramatic. I'm just done with the drama. How's your bae?

Laurie: Still gives amazing head. Still like him.

Rose: Good. Can't wait to catch up. Hurry your butt over here.

Mr. C: Did you file a sexual harassment order against me?

I blink at his message. Did I *what?*

Rose: Of course not! What the hell?

Mr. C: That's what I thought. It's okay, it's probably an error or somebody has taken down the wrong details.

Rose: At work or with the police?

Mr. C: Just at work. If you could call through tomorrow and retract it, I'd be grateful.

Rose: No problem. Worst first week back ever.

Mr. C: Why? What else has happened?

Rose: Nothing. I've got it under control.

Mr. C: Is he giving you any hassle? Do you need me to step in?

Rose: I've got everything under control.

Mr. C: Just say the word.

I smile at my phone and prepare for Laurie's visit by showering and getting in my pajamas, the glowing Rudolph ones. I'm never going to stop wearing them. I don't care that it's not Christmas.

Rose: Did you file a sexual harassment order at work from me against Mr. C?

I contemplate sending the message but end up deleting it and huffing. I know it's Pax who has done this, it's got to be. What the hell is he playing at?

Laurie arrives and I relax a smidge, allowing myself to enjoy wine, pizza and a rom-com.

"I can't believe how different you look," she says for the thousandth time since arriving.

"You too. I can't believe you're blonde. I miss your ginger."

"Me too. I might go back," she holds a lock of hair up to the light. "HAIRBRUSH ORGASMS."

"No, thank you, I have a vibrator."

"VIBRATOR UP YOUR MOM'S BUTT."

"Don't have a mom."

I laugh when she sighs, clearly frustrated with herself. Mostly she just gets on with it but recently it's been getting her down. I think it's

causing issues with her new bae and the kind of things they can do together. I don't think it bothers him, but I know she's just waiting for the other shoe to drop. It will bother him eventually, or so she believes. I said she just needs to find the male version of me who loves her tics for what they are. A part of her.

"You good?" I ask, squeezing her shoulder.

"I'm so good." She smiles sadly and we both scream when something outside smashes. It sounded like my car and sure enough the alarm starts.

"I'll call nine-one-one," Laurie whispers and I go to the window in the kitchen, heart racing and palms sweating.

I can't see anybody outside, but the streetlight highlights the glass shattered all over the ground around my poor red beauty.

"Somebody has broken into my car," I grumble, moving to the front door but Laurie stops me with a hand on my arm.

"Could it be Pax?" she asks still on hold with the non-emergency police number.

"I hope not, It's probably a coincidence. I left a ton of change in the cup holder."

"I told you to stop doing that."

"I know."

She spends twenty minutes trying to get through before the person takes our details and tells us it's not worth pursuing and to contact my insurance provider. Yeah, right.

"Want to stay at my place?" Laurie asks and I don't even hesitate to nod. "Get your things, we'll go as soon as Kyle gets here."

"You called him?"

She nods again. "He said he's on his way."

I grab my toiletries and what I need for work the next day and leave my car in the mess it's in. It doesn't even bother me to leave it behind, there's no way I'm doing more than boarding it up and waiting for Safelite to come and fix it. None of which I can do until tomorrow anyway.

When Kyle arrives, we tape cardboard to the open hole, all of us on edge wondering if the person responsible is still nearby, and then we dive into his car and he drives us to Laurie's.

It's not until I'm in her bed trying to sleep that I hear her and Kyle talking about it and what he says gives me the chills.

"The change was still in the cupholder."

Which means either somebody wanted to randomly vandalize my car, or it was definitely Pax.

There are no gifts for me on my desk at work the next day either. Thank heavens. I'm also really late because I had to get the subway and I got off at the wrong station.

“Sorry I’m late!” I cry, pushing open the door to Mr. Conti’s office. “OH MY GOD!” My hands fly to my eyes after locking on to his for seconds longer than I should have allowed, and then I turn so sharply I walk straight into the edge of the closing door. Pain radiates through my temple and I fall onto my ass with a jarring thud as Mr. Conti pulls up his pants and does up his belt. I can hear him rattling. I’m not looking. I’ll never be able to look at him again. I just caught him plowing his wife from behind over his desk. Pants pushed down below his ass, her skirt up and over her hips.

“I thought you locked the door,” Mr. Conti hisses as I scramble to my feet and leave the office feeling dizzy and sore.

“I did,” Mrs. Conti replies, equally as quiet but I’m already out of there. “I should go.”

I bury my face in my arms on my desk, not daring to look up as she passes and calls for the elevator by rapidly pressing the button.

“Six plus six, times six, add six,” I mutter to myself, trying to remove the images from my head but I have photographic memory. They aren’t going anywhere.

The light flashes, he’s calling. I don’t answer.

It flashes again.

I stop being a coward and hold down the button, “Yes, Mr. Conti?”

“Can you come here for a second, please?”

“No, thank you.” I let go of the button and switch on my laptop.

What is this clenching feeling in my chest? Why am I so disturbed and upset by this? Why is my heart pounding and my stomach twisting? I don’t care that he’s fucking his wife. I’m just embarrassed. That’s all. I’m not jealous.

The light flashes again.

I press and hold the button again.

“Yes, Mr. Conti?”

“Come here.”

“Please don’t make me.”

“We’re all adults here, Rose. Get a grip and come here.”

“I disagree.” I release the button, knowing I’m being petulant but I’m irrationally angry with him.

The light flashes again.

I press it and snap, “What?”

“I said come here.”

I stand, smooth down my pants, ensure my shirt is tucked in nicely and then head into his room, my low heels clicking on the wooden floor.

Stepping inside, I mentally prepare myself for the chastisement I’m about to receive.

“You are two hours late for work,” he snaps, his sleeves rolled up

his strong forearms, his ass resting on the edge of his desk closest to me. His ass that I just saw bare and from the side.

It was a nice ass.

Nope… not going there.

I stop less than two meters from him, my mind blank.

"Did you hear what I just said?" He clicks his fingers in front of my face.

"Don't do that, I'm not a dog." I push his hand away from me. "Yes, I heard you. I'm surprised you even noticed I was gone."

His brows pull in and a flicker of something flashes in his eyes. "What happened? You've never been late before, nor have you ever switched off your phone."

"Forget it," I answer, glancing at the door behind me. "I have so much to catch up on."

"Wait," he grabs my arm and reaches for the hair at my temple. "You're bru——"

"Don't!" I yank my arm free and step away from him. "Don't touch me. I know where your hands have been."

He chuckles and wiggles his fingers at me. "I washed them, don't worry. Let me look at your head."

"Worry about your wife. I'm fine."

He sounds surprised as he asks, "Are you mad at me?"

It does seem like I am, I can see why he'd think that but I'm not mad, not at him, not on purpose. "I'm just having a really shit day, Mr. Conti."

"Tell me about it."

"I have so much to do."

He grabs my arm again, ignoring my protests and pulls me to the leather sofa. "Sit, talk, I'll listen."

I fold my arms over my chest, unable to look at him right now because all I can see is his face contorted, eyes squeezed shut, ass clenched and...

I squirm in my seat, trying not to think of how he gripped her hip with his large hand. The same hand pulling my hair back again.

"You've got a bruise."

"I was assaulted by your door, bruises happen," I retort pushing his hand away again.

"Talk to me."

I exhale long and deep and look into the eyes of the man I usually consider my friend. "My car got broken into last night, so I stayed at Laurie's and then I had to get the subway to work but I got off at the wrong station, and I'm Samsung whereas Laurie is Apple so when my phone died I couldn't charge it because I forgot my power cord." *And breathe.*

“Okay.” He takes my hands in his. “What have you done about your car?”

“Nothing, my phone died.”

“Right, well, let’s cross that off the list. Did you report it?”

“Yep, they told me to call my insurance company. Fat chance. I’m not raising my premiums.”

“Police are useless these days, they’re too stretched thin,” he mumbles, still holding my hands. “Okay, I’ll get your car sorted, you’ve got a power cord at your desk, and I’ll drive you home after work. Okay?”

Now I feel bad for yelling at him and getting angry because he was taking pleasure in the woman he married.

He releases my hands and opens his arms. “Need a hug?”

“I do but not from you, you smell like sex,” I mutter petulantly, shrieking when he grabs me anyway and pulls me back into his chest. “Stop… so gross.” His strong arms band around me and then his fingers start digging into my sides.

I *hate* being tickled. It’s torture.

“Stop!” I beg, laughing so hard everything hurts not just the area he’s prodding and poking.

I grab his hair and pull, making him cry out. Soon we’re both fighting for power but he’s steadily beating me, grabbing my hands and pulling them away from his body.

“Sex hand,” he says and covers my mouth with his palm. True to his word he smells and tastes of soap, but still… *ewww*. I bite the fleshy side of his palm and really sink my teeth in.

“Ow. Ow. Ow. OW!” He releases me and I stop biting him.

I sit up, haughty and with attitude. Glaring at him, I stand and smooth the crinkles out of my clothes. “This is a professional workplace.”

He laughs his ass off as I stomp out of his office with aching ribs and a sore head.

Ezra sorted my car out for me while at work, he had it taken away for repair and dropped me off at home at the end of the day. My car is gone, the glass has been cleared and I run into my apartment like my heels are about to catch fire. I open the entrance door and slam it closed and make quick work of the door to my apartment.

I leave my keys in the lock, just in case, and check all the nooks and crannies for bad guys. I’m so paranoid. I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight.

I have a can of mace somewhere, so I search for that and keep it in my baggy pajama pocket. Then I sit and watch TV on the lowest volume while reading the things I need for our trip to NYC in a couple of days.

Nothing happens. Or so I thought because, when I wake up the next day, my neighbor upstairs told me a man kept asking her to let him in at two in the morning. She said he said that he was worried about me, because I hadn't been in touch for days, but she saw me leave in the morning and saw my car and put two and two together.

She threatened to call the police and he left.

It had to be him.

What is he playing at?

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-One

His AMAZING ass.

"It's going to be okay," I reassure Mr. C, placing my hand on his bouncing knee. For once he's the jittery one. "You're going to nail it."

He relaxes and his closest friend and executive recruiter, Robert Butler, who I've met many times over the past year, looks at my hand and then at me. I remove it before he can speculate.

"She's right, it's in the bag," Robert agrees, stretching and groaning.

"And I've got all of the info in here." I tap my head. "So, don't worry about losing your place. We practiced the cues. I've got you."

"Have you got me too?" Robert asks, openly flirting with me. He's a natural flirt with any woman he considers pretty. Which means he used to completely ignore me before. "I need somebody to hold my hand."

"Ask your dick," I retort, making him laugh.

"Ask it if you're allowed to hold it? Certainly."

"Robert," Mr. C snaps, giving him a pointed look.

Robert's smile doesn't fade, and his hazel eyes linger on me for a beat longer.

Robert was a last-minute addition to this short trip. Robert thought it best to have somebody else who knows the tech they're pimping out as well as Mr. C does and eventually convinced him to bring him along. It makes sense but I can't deny the fact I'm disappointed that it's not going to be just us two.

I need to get a grip.

Mr. Conti is married, and my brain is blurring lines between us all on its own. I don't know why or how, but it is, and I know better than that.

Although, to be honest, me wanting him alone could just be because I like how Mr. C and I move around each other. We don't demand each other's attention and he's always happy for me to do my own thing so long as I do my job. Whereas Robert can be insufferable. He drives me insane.

I start clicking my pen in sixes until Mr. Conti takes it from my hand and puts it in his pocket.

I rest back, rubbing my thighs with my hands, listening to the men practice their pitches on each other. Normally I do this with Mr. C but he's found a replacement for this trip.

When Ezra heads to the restroom, Robert stares at me, smiling wryly.

"So," Robert directs at me. "Tell me… what happened to you to make you super-hot all of a sudden?"

I blink slowly at him. I cannot believe he just said that.

"Does speaking like that to women really get you laid?"

"For the most part, yep." He's so unfazed by everything and anything, including my ire towards him. "Some women dig the attitude."

"Not me," I reply, my tone strong and firm. "Stop speaking to me like I'm beneath you because I have a vagina."

"What if I want you beneath me because you have a vagina?"

"You're gross."

"Nah, I'm just forward. You're single, I'm single… we're spending two nights in the same hotel."

I smile flatly at him. "I'd rather set myself on fire."

"Baby, I could totally do that for you," he jests, and I find my lips twitching because I totally lined that up for him. "See? I'm charming and funny, who can resist?"

"Stop talking."

His smile broadens, showing slightly crooked front teeth which only add to his charm. I can see why the ladies fancy him. It's a shame I don't. I imagine he'd do a great one-night stand. He's got the type of arrogance where you just know they're good in bed and it's not just for show until the shit finale.

"Everything alright?" Mr. C asks, his eyes flickering between us when he makes his approach and slides past me to reclaim his seat.

"Just working things out with Rose," Robert replies, grinning, his eyes still on me. "She's offered me her room for the night."

"Ewww," I respond and cringe smile. "I'd rather eat my uterus than let you anywhere near it."

Mr. C laughs and yanks on my dark braid. "Good girl." He then glares at his friend. "What did we talk about?"

Robert, still smiling, sits back and stares at me some more. Not in a creepy way, just a forward way. I know that if I told him to back off and meant it, he would. But there's something about this situation that entices me. Maybe a fuck you to Pax. Maybe even a fuck you to Mr. C.

Maybe I should consider his offer, it might help me sleep tonight.

"Anybody else hungry?" Robert asks and we all nod our heads in

tandem.

We wait, Robert and me, outside of the room where Mr. C is now discussing business with Hiro, the head of Denki No Corp.

They've done their pitch, we've given them the tour, I've answered any questions Rob and Ezra couldn't, and now we wait.

It's so nerve wracking.

If Mr. Conti gets this contract it'll mean so much for the future of this company and solar energy in general. We're talking solar phone screens, solar cars, solar houses… solar everything. The more people buy and the more the tech is made, the cheaper the products become and the more widespread they will be used. The less of a negative footprint on the world. We'll be one step closer to stopping the increase of pollution.

I know how much this means to Mr. C.

To everyone in the company.

We all hold our breath when the door opens and Hiro walks out, talking on the phone. His team of people say something, Hiro replies, and they all cheer.

They bid us goodbye and I'm terrified because Mr. C hasn't come out of the boardroom yet.

Is this bad news?

When they're gone, I creep inside with Robert hot on my heels.

Mr. C is sitting on the table edge, gripping it with both hands, his head hanging forward.

Oh shit.

"Hey," Robert starts, squeezing Ezra's shoulder. "Next time we ____"

"We got it," Mr. C says, slowly looking up and finding my eyes. My heart starts to accelerate, adrenaline pumps through my veins. "We got the contract."

"What?" I breathe, feeling my mouth fall open and stay open.

"Fuck me," Robert whispers.

Mr. C hugs me with his arms under mine and around my back. He spins me twice, drops me and cups my cheeks. "WE FUCKING GOT IT!"

We start screaming, all three of us, and I start jumping, just because my excitement can't be expressed by simply standing.

I even hug Robert because I'm too excited to not hug people.

"Let's get drunk!" Robert cries and I agree loudly.

We head to a nightclub, drinking champagne that I arranged with the

car service for this very moment. I figured either way we'd be drinking to drown our sorrows or celebrate.

I pull my bun free, mess up my thick hair, and reapply my matte red lipstick. I get rid of my blazer and pop open the top few buttons of my white shirt.

"Good to go?" I ask nobody in particular.

Both men confirm at the exact same time, "Good to go."

I take the glass offered and down it. Robert pours me more. Mr. C swigs straight from the bottle.

"WE FUCKING DID IT!" he yells again after opening the window, I've never seen him so animated.

I like it.

I sit between them as we drive, singing songs together I'm not sure they know the words to.

I'm relieved when we reach a nightclub that's busy, almost glad that the meeting took so long and ended so late because, if it hadn't, we'd be in drunken limbo.

That's where you get too drunk too early and can't go anywhere because nowhere is open yet.

We almost fall out of the car and then Mr. C slings his arm around my shoulders like it's the most natural thing in the world, pressing the bottle into the chest of the bouncer as we walk in. Robert has connections. Wherever we are now already knew we were coming because we are taken straight to a VIP suite in the corner, complete with tablet to order drinks from the bar.

"This is awesome," I say, playing on the tablet built into the table center to figure out what cocktail I want. I order my drink and theirs, smiling at them both as they chat excitedly about the company's future and theirs.

Our drinks are brought over but it's not long before we're ordering more.

"Do you dance?" Robert asks me.

I nod. "Hell yeah, I do. Not well, though."

He holds out his hand and points to the dance floor. "Dance with me." It's not a question or a request, it's an order.

"Only if we all go." I glance at Mr. C who is already standing. "I guess we're all going then."

Buzzed, happy, and hopeful for the future, we all hit the crowded dance floor in our business attire and laugh as we move around each other. I'm spun under arms, hugged into chests. At one point I'm practically tag teamed from both angles but it's all good fun.

We don't stop until we're sweating and we're so drunk there's no choice but to go back to the hotel. Such a shame.

The ride back we're even more obnoxious and loud than we were

on the way. It's so funny, seeing two fully grown men acting like teenage boys. Although Robert is the more sober one out of the three of us, he's still the louder one.

I manage to get them to shush as we head to our rooms, so we don't get kicked out. This is a really fancy hotel.

"The party's not over yet," Mr. C declares as Robert opens the door and I carry our second bottle of champagne in. They're both wearing my red lipstick because they've both been drinking out of the same bottle as me. Something sober me would never do.

Drunk me is an animal.

Robert connects his phone to a speaker and plays music, I drink more champagne, still dancing drunkenly just because.

"LET'S BOUNCE!" I cry and kick off my shoes before diving onto Mr. C's bed. I go up and down. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down. Up and… shit I lose count.

"Fuck yeah, I love bouncing on beds," Robert declares and joins me, when he goes up, I come down. It's so funny. I can't stop laughing.

Mr. C joins us, and I'm surprised the bed doesn't break with all three of us on it.

Robert tries to jump from the bed to the sofa about four meters away, but he falls halfway, landing facedown on the floor.

I have never laughed so hard in my life. I have tears streaming down my face. I can't breathe.

I get down off the bed to check on him as Ezra flops back onto it, mumbling about how drunk he is.

I crawl over to Robert and roll him over, wondering if he's fallen asleep or died. He's laughing silently when I see his face. I slap his chest for worrying me.

"Asshole," I mutter, and look at Mr. C's foot hanging over the end of the bed.

We both hear a soft snore come from him and I laugh into Robert's shoulder. Pressing my forehead to the fabric of his shirt.

"He's so drunk," Robert whispers as I lean over him, ready to somehow get back on my feet.

"Aren't we all?"

"True."

"You're real pretty, Ms. Sinclair." He grabs my head and I squeal when his lips hit mine.

I rip away, panting and staring at him wide-eyed. Trying to find reasons as to why this is a bad idea. I count six reasons why this might actually be a good idea and then remind myself that when I'm sober this guy repulses me with his arrogance.

He tries to kiss me again, but I shake my head and nod at Ezra's

snoring form.

"Worried he'll see?"

"He's my boss."

"Not tonight he's not," he breathes and kisses me again. This time I allow it and he rolls me over on the rug, deepening it further. "I'm not him."

"Sorry?"

"I'm not him, I get it, I see the way you look at him."

"I don't know——"

"It's okay, I don't care but just know he's never going to look at you the same. He loves his wife."

"Oh my God," I breathe, trying not to laugh and cry at the same time.

"Let's have some fun, me and you, I'll even let you call me Ezra."

"Oh my God," I whisper hiss, definitely laughing now. "You're an idiot, Robert Butler."

"You're not denying it."

I shake my head at him, still laughing and shove him off my body. I owe him no explanations, he's going to believe what he wants no matter what I say. "Come on. Let's cover him up and go."

I wake up to a loud banging noise at my hotel room door. So does Robert. Though he's more startled than I am.

"What the fuck?" he asks breathlessly, his eyes blinking rapidly to adjust to the dark.

"You get it," I grumble, hoping there's not a fire because I'm not moving for anything. My head is spinning, and the sun is shining through a crack in the curtains. I'm not going anywhere today.

I hear his feet thud on the ground as he approaches the door.

When it swings open there's silence.

"Oh shit," Robert mutters.

I sit up, holding the blanket tight to my body because I'm only in a bra and thong. I peer at the door, shielding my eyes from the light with my hand, and connect with the livid gray eyes of Mr. C.

"Pack, we're going home!" he snarls, his hands in tight fists by his sides.

"But we're supposed to be spending another night here," I whine. I was so looking forward to seeing NYC.

"I said pack." He stomps away and my chest flutters painfully.

"What's his problem?" I grumble, rubbing my eyes as Robert approaches his pile of clothes and starts to pull them on.

"That's exactly what I'm wondering," Robert murmurs so quietly I

only just hear him with strained effort. He looks me up and down, a curious glint in his eye. “You’re not fucking him, are you?”

I give him a disgusted look. “Are you kidding me? He’s married.”

“Right…” He shrugs his shoulders. “Thanks for letting me crash in here last night.”

“Whatever, I still don’t like you.”

Laughing, he leaves my room and I shower, brush my teeth, and try not to die.

When I leave my room and ready myself to knock on Mr. Conti’s to let him know I’m good to go, it opens and the same livid gray eyes that scowled at me earlier are still full force.

“You ready?” he asks, and I nod, shaking my suitcase by the handle. “Where’s Robert?”

“I don’t know.”

“Fun night?”

I feel like the way he asked is a trick question. No matter what I say is going to be bad. “The best. Yours?”

“Shit.”

“Why are you mad all of a sudden?” I ask, grabbing his arm.

“Because people don’t live up to my inflated opinion of them.” His reply is as cryptical as his anger.

“Who? Me? What did I do?”

He doesn’t reply, just goes on ahead. I twist my damp hair around my hand, wishing Robert would hurry up and not leave me alone with this moody asshole.

“I asked you a question.”

“And I didn’t answer!” he yells, turning on me suddenly. “Remember who pays who here. I’m your boss, you’re my employee. Act like it and shut up when I don’t want you to speak.”

The reasonable me that I left back in LA would have shut up and been a good employee. The unreasonable me that NYC has brought out in me, sits on the floor, crosses her legs, and refuses to move.

“Get up, I’m not in the mood for this.”

“Nope.”

“I said get up.”

I look up at him, feeling hungry, tired, and hungover. “I. Said. Nope.”

“I will fire you if you don’t move your ass.”

I smile at him, leaning back against the wall. “Fire me then.”

He opens and closes his mouth.

I just called his bluff and now I’m starting to realize the pattern to this madness.

“I’m waiting. Say the words. Tell me I’m fired.”

He’s even more livid now than he was before. “I’m not kidding

around."

"Prove it."

"I don't want to fire you. You're forcing my hand."

I shrug my shoulders. "Well I'm not moving until you've calmed down and apologize."

"Me? I should apologize?"

"Yes, or stop playing games like Pax and tell me what the fuck I did wrong so *I* can apologize!"

He winces, obviously not liking the fact I compared him to my ex. This seems to calm him down immensely, the anger leaves his eyes, but a harshness remains in the creases. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I didn't?"

"No," he grits, sitting down beside me. "It's me. I just need to go home and be with my family."

"Why? We're supposed to be celebrating, remember?"

He looks at me and I look at him. "I don't feel like celebrating anymore."

"Why?"

"I had some… bad news." He rubs his eyes and looks away, his profile emanates so much sadness and frustration.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because it won't change anything."

"Fine, but I'm here if you need me. Even when you're being an ass." I lean forward and go to press my lips to his cheek but he turns his head at the last second and I capture his soft lips instead. I jolt back, surprised and anxious. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to——"

I squeak, letting out a high-pitched noise from my throat when he grabs my hair and crushes his lips to mine. His minty tongue licks the seam of my lips but I just can't.

I can't even entertain this right now.

What is he doing?

This is going to ruin everything.

His hand grips tighter, his kiss gets stronger.

I rip my head to the side and pull free so hard I fall away from him. "What are you doing?" I shriek, tears filling my eyes as I scramble to my feet and he follows.

"I…" he stammers, trying to find the right words, eyes panicked, desperate.

When he doesn't find them, he yanks me to him again and tries for another kiss.

This is Mr. Conti… my boss… my friend… a married man… father

to a little girl I adore. Yes, I've had weird dreams and fantasies about him, but what he's asking of me right now is to play a part in ruining his marriage.

I wonder how many other women already have.

I slap him around the face harder than I've ever slapped anyone around the face. My hand stings and a shiny red welt shows up across his cheek.

We stare at each other but it's me who speaks first and my words are dripping with vehemence. "Consider this my two weeks' notice."

"Oh shit, what did I miss?" Robert asks, appearing from his room at the exact moment I needed him to. "Why'd she quit? What happened?"

"Rose," Mr. Conti calls as I walk away from both of them. "Rose… I'm sorry."

"Don't *ever* speak to me again," I reply. "We are no longer friends."

"Oh shit, you did something *really* bad."

"Shut up, Robert."

I walk away, ignoring them both, feeling my lips tingle and burn so desperately. Truth be told, I didn't think I had the power to push him away, but I can't be her. I can't be the other woman. I can't be the reason Maria has two homes, and that's how these things always end.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Two

He wants me.

"Please, just let me explain, or apologize…" He tries to speak to me repeatedly, but I plug in my headphones and ignore him. I'm not going to be some notch on his adulterer bed post. I'm nobody's second best. I don't want a man who is already married. No matter how badly I wanted that kiss he so desperately gave me.

I can resist desire. I know I can. That's all this is.

When I unplug my headphones to give my ears a break, I can hear Robert and Mr. C talking quietly. The sound carries to the back of the private jet where I've burrowed into a seat with a blanket and my phone.

I strain to hear them but catch bits and pieces.

"You wouldn't wake up, my keycard was in your room, I couldn't be bothered to go to the reception."

"That's not…" Mr. C trails off for a moment. "… So, you didn't sleep with her?"

"We slept, she rejected my advances if that's what you're wondering." He laughs quietly. "Why do you care, Ezra? What does it matter if I fuck your staff? She's not *my* staff."

"I don't want her to get hurt."

"She looked pretty hurt by you before we left." He glances my way, but I avert my eyes and make it look like I'm playing on my phone. I can see the back of Mr. Conti's head from where I'm sitting and see all of Robert's face. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he lies and my heart sinks further. Just another lie he's going to go and tell his wife.

"Didn't look like nothing. What's going on with you, Ezra? You're distracted at the moment, you never go home…"

Whatever he replies I don't hear because we hit some mild turbulence and the plane starts to rattle.

Turbulence doesn't bother me so long as I distract myself, I'm used to it for the most part. We travel so much it's inevitable.

I touch my fingers to my lips, still unable to believe that he kissed

me.

He actually kissed me, and *I said no*.

I'm stronger than I thought.

We all return to our seats and buckle in, I'm annoyed when Mr. Conti takes the seat next to me as the plane gets a bit rocky. He straps in around the middle and reaches over to give my belt a tug. That's something he does every time. It must be a habit but right now I don't want his hands on me.

"I have it, thanks."

"Can we talk?"

"No."

"Rose, I——"

I look at him in the eyes, giving him a stern appraisal. "I said, *no*. I don't ever want to talk about that."

"I was angry, and hurting, and I'd just had an argument with my wife——"

My jaw hits the floor and my eyes widen. So I was just a filler while he dealt with his emotions?

"Shouldn't have gone for that pitch," Robert mutters from the seats behind us.

I'm guessing he knows Mr. C kissed me or tried to.

"Shut up, Robert," he seethes and looks at me again. "I don't want anything from you, Rose. I was just… hurting and you were there. I'm sorry. I should have had more respect for you than that."

"Can we stop talking about this now? God. This is… this just… Fuck. No." I unbuckle my seat angrily, grumbling under my breath about stupid men, as my cheeks heat from the embarrassment of this situation.

"If you move seats, I'm just going to follow you," he points out, smiling with mischief.

I buckle myself back in, smacking at his hands when he tries to tighten it and check how safe it is. My cheeks are aflame, and my eyes fiery.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, placing his hand on mine. "Don't quit." His thumb rolls over the back of my hand. "Please. Can we just pretend it didn't happen? I love my wife, you know this, you know I'd never purposely hurt her."

I want to ask him what would have happened if I'd kissed him back. I want to ask him would he have followed me back to his hotel room or mine? Would we have fucked and ruined everything we've worked for?

Instead, I don't reply, I play on my phone and the turbulence finally clears. He doesn't move, nor does he let go of my hand and I relax, letting him hold it for a while. It's the only guilty pleasure I'll

allow myself when it comes to him.

I've got to really watch myself around him now, another stress I just don't need. Ugh. Why did he have to kiss me? Why did he have to take that step?

I leave them at LAX when we touch down, getting a cab on company dime back home but what I find has me shrieking and almost vomiting.

My car tires have all been let down, my car that was only repaired a few days ago. Acid has been poured all over the glossy paintwork and the word whore has been written on the hood.

My house is no different. My door has the scarlet letter A and my windows have all been sprayed with vile words. Insults. Despicable insults.

I take pictures using my phone, my hands tremble making the photos blurry. I try to calm down to get clearer images but it's hard.

Tears blur my vision, angry fucking enraged tears. I'm so mad. How dare he?

I unlock the entrance door and stomp to my apartment. The door isn't damaged, but he could have broken in elsewhere. I'm careful when I enter, crouching down just in case he tries to grab me, but once inside I realize nothing has been touched and nobody is here.

I'm trembling so rapidly my teeth are chattering.

"Hey, Rose?" My upstairs neighbor pushes the door I left open. "I called the police when I saw it this morning. They came out and told me to tell you to give them a call as soon as you get back. They're checking local surveillance, but I doubt they'll catch whoever it was. I have the details you need."

I wipe my eyes. "I'm so sorry, Betty. I don't know why this is happening."

"I know. It's not your fault. Some people are just seriously disturbed. You should consider staying somewhere else for a while. You're obviously not safe here."

"I think you might be right," I breathe, sniffling.

She wraps her arms around me, giving me an awkward, brief, yet comforting hug. "It'll get better. He'll move on eventually. Is there anyone I can call for you?"

I shake my head. "I'll handle it. But thank you."

"Well, why don't you come upstairs and sit with me while you do it?"

I consider it but the last thing I want is to drag my neighbors into my mess any more than I have. "Thank you so much but I'm okay. I appreciate the offer."

She senses my need for space and leaves me to it. The moment the

door closes I scream and knock everything off my kitchen counter. Wooden spoons and other utensils scatter over the floor.

I call the police and tell them about Pax and they promise to look into it. I call Laurie after sending her photos, but she doesn't answer. She's got a friend's kid's baptism this week over in Michigan. I completely forgot.

This is why it sucks to not have family. For the first time in years I truly feel the loss and abandonment that I thought I was surely over.

It's an hour later when Laurie calls me, and I sob down the phone to her. She cries too, scared for me and sad that she can't get back yet. There are no flights, but even if there was a flight, I wouldn't let her take it.

"I wish I knew what to do," she mutters. "I feel useless."

"Me too," I reply, feeling for the mace spray in my pocket. "I've put in a report about him but what if it makes it worse? They'll question him, they won't be able to prove anything and then he'll just get worse."

"He'll get bored. He's just sour that you've left him and even more sour that you went away with Mr. Cuntyflaps."

"Don't call him that," I grumble, feeling defensive of him despite the fact he doesn't deserve it right now.

Somebody calls her name in the background.

"You go," I say to her softly and reassuringly, "I'll be fine."

"Will you?"

"You know I will. And I want to hear all about your tics during the service."

"Oh, honey… it was hell. I'll call you later."

We disconnect the call and I suddenly feel so alone again. My eyes are stinging from how much I've been crying and am still crying.

I sit alone in my apartment, jittery, nervous, clicking a pen and squeezing my stress ball. I have a can of mace beside me and I'm ready to use it if necessary.

Rose: Why are you doing this to me?

My phone rings, it's Pax. I shouldn't answer but I'm so mad.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, sniffling clear enough for him to hear. "I haven't done anything to you. I was never bad to you."

"I'll come over; we can talk face to face."

"No," I reply firmly. "Just leave me alone. Stop torturing me and leave me the fuck alone."

I hang up and block all incoming calls. I can still call the cops if I need but Pax can't call me now.

What did I ever do to anyone to deserve this?

There's a knock at my door which is odd because I didn't hear the buzzer sound.

I hug a pillow tighter to my chest. Is it him? I daren't move.

"Rose? It's me, Izabella, I'm coming in, okay? Your neighbor is with me, Betty. She's going to use the spare key."

I get up and pad to the door before they can use said key and the moment Izabella's kind eyes and face come into view I break down and sob into her shoulder.

"Oh, sweet girl," she whispers, holding me like I imagine my mother would have. She strokes my hair and rocks us both. "It's going to be okay."

I lean back and wipe my eyes on a tissue I grab off the counter. "How did you know?"

"Laurie called."

My heart warms for my friend.

"But you should have called me."

"I didn't want to bother you," I say, still trembling with adrenaline and fear.

Hey gray eyes glow with sorrow. "You could never bother me. We're friends." Will she still want to be my friend if she knows that Ezra tried to kiss me this morning?

"Please don't tell Mr. Conti," I beg, "I don't want to cause anymore issues at work."

"He should know what his psychopathic staff are doing. Have you reported it to HR?"

I nod. "I did all of that today."

"Then he might know already."

"He's home with his wife and I asked them to keep it quiet. I don't want anybody thinking I'm causing drama."

She smiles softly, her eyes still sad and concerned. "You can't help that you chose the wrong guy. This is not your fault."

"You shouldn't be dragged into this either. I don't know the extent of his crazy. You should go."

"Not without you," she states, pulling me towards my bedroom. "Pack what you need, you're coming to stay with me and Mario until it's safe to go home."

"But…"

"No buts. Come on. We've got space."

I consider my options and realize hers is the best option I have. "Thank you, Izabella."

"No thank-yous, just move your butt. Mario is standing outside with a gun in its holster and a baseball bat at the ready. He thinks he's Rambo, even in his old age."

I giggle and it feels so good to giggle.

I empty my suitcase and pack it fresh, laughing when Izabella picks up some of my lacy undergarments. “Well… these are pretty.” I snatch them from her hand while laughing and stuff them into my case. “Your bedroom is so organized. Maybe even more so than mine and I pay a person. Perhaps I should start paying you.”

“I might take you up on that soon,” I jest, thinking of the notice I handed in to Mr. C today.

“You’re quitting your job?”

I nod and let her assume it’s because of Pax.

“That’s probably for the best, get you out of that psychopath’s environment.” I’m surprised she agrees so easily. “Unfortunately, even in this era men still outrank women when it comes to harassment.”

Izabella is more the type to tell me to not let him win and to fight for the job I love. So, this has confused me to no end.

“You’re right.” I sigh heavily, feeling the weight of everything pressing on my shoulders and back. “I’m so tired, I’m still hungover after last night. I’m not going to be good company,” I add on a whisper and she cups my cheeks with her hands.

“We’ll get you home, run you a bath, get you fed and rested and you’re to take tomorrow off.”

I don’t tell her that it’s my day off anyway I just nod, zip up my neatly packed case and head out after her.

Mario is waiting by the door like she said with a baseball bat in his hand. When he sees me, he gives me a sideways hug and leads us to his car.

I sit in the back listening to them bicker like the married couple that they are as they drive me to their house, which is a good hour away. Pax won’t follow us there. I hope. Maybe I should have gotten a hotel instead. What if he damages their property too?

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Three

He makes time for his wonderful family.

It's late, *really late*, maybe one in the morning when I hear the door open and then feel the bed dip beside me, startling me so strongly I turn over, ready to spray mace and blind us both. I've not slept yet. I'm tired but I don't feel safe and I don't have my own bedding. I don't think I've stopped crying either for a while. When do tears run out? I once read that if you keep crying and crying, eventually you just fall asleep.

That hasn't happened yet.

"Ezra?" I whisper as he pushes his arm under my neck and pulls me into his body. He's on top of the quilt so there's a good two inches of thick padding separating us.

"Shhh," he whispers soothingly while tucking my head under his chin. "We'll fix this. I swear it."

I absorb his warmth and kindness, feeling safe for the first time since that plane touched down.

I don't care that this might be inappropriate or against the rules. I don't care if this upsets anybody. I just care that right now I feel safe and protected and warm. My trembling body slowly calms down and I feel my breath even out. He holds me tight until I tug on the blanket, needing more of his body than what he should give me.

He looks at the door and then back and me and rolls off the covers before pulling them back and climbing back in bed with me.

We tangle together again, my thigh between his, my head on the same pillow as his. I hold him tight like I don't ever want to let go, and truth be told, *I don't*. Our eyes meet in the dark and he strokes my cheek with the tips of his fingers. It feels so nice and relaxing, but also arousing.

"I'm sorry I didn't kiss you back," I say quietly, and he pushes my hair back.

"I'm sorry I kissed you at all," he replies just as quietly, and I know in my heart he means because of how he upset me and not because he didn't want to kiss me. The look in his eyes is showing me that he still

does. I wonder if the look in mine is begging him to kiss me again. I might not say no this time. “Try to sleep.”

I press my forehead to his cheek and close my eyes on his command. He tickles my arm and shoulder as I concentrate on the beating of his heart.

It lulls me to sleep, my forbidden lullaby.

I’m awoken by the sound of Izabella hissing in the darkness, though I don’t open my eyes. I daren’t see the face of the woman who just walked in on her married son in bed with another.

“It’s not like that,” Ezra hisses back and I stay breathing softly, keeping my eyes closed as he untangles my body from his, leaving me feeling cold and no longer safe. “Not here, she’ll wake up, she hasn’t slept.”

They leave the room, arguing under their breaths and the door clicks shut behind them. My heart races as I consider what just happened.

She’s going to think we’re having an affair; I should have backed him up and said something.

I need to stop being such a coward.

I climb out of bed, my bare feet hit the cold wooden floor.

Stretching tall, I click my spine and prepare myself for the moment to come. What will I say to her about how she found us? How will I explain that we’re just friends? Is that what we are? Have I been lying to myself?

I’ve never been inappropriate with him, or I’ve tried not to be. Sometimes things happened, odd touches and looks that could be construed as intimate, but what happened last night has never happened before. She must know I was just looking for comfort and Ezra offered it. What was he doing here in the middle of the night anyway? Did she call him? She never promised she wouldn’t. It was unfair of me to ask her to lie to her son and unfair of me to come here at all.

It’s unfair on Mrs. Conti, Ezra’s wife. I should never have held him all night, I shouldn’t have fallen asleep beside him. Did he sleep too?

The door creaks as it opens, making me wince. I move to the stairs and lightly step down them on the tips of my toes. I can hear them talking in hushed tones in the kitchen.

I pass family photos and artwork, one being of Ezra and Mrs. Conti on their wedding day. It sends a chill down my spine. How would I feel if I was her, finding out my husband had comforted another woman in bed all night, not knowing what they did together? Having

to trust their honesty based on their word, wondering if they're having a joke at my expense, laughing in bed together at how foolish I am.

But Izabella's words stop me in my tracks. Words I should never have heard.

"How long have you been in love with her, Ezra?" she asks and my hand flies to my mouth.

He's not in love with me, that's a ridiculous idea. We were just hugging.

He confirms my inner monologue by replying, "I'm not in love with her… I have a family. I love my wife."

His words stab me, a contradiction to all my other feelings on infidelity and marriage vows. How can I in one moment say how bad I feel for ever contributing to his wife's unhappiness, in the same moment say how much it hurts me to hear that he loves her?

"I don't doubt your love for your wife, but I can see your love for Rose just as clearly, maybe even more so. I can see it, Ezra, your father can see it… it's only a matter of time before your wife sees it and Rose does too." She pauses, he doesn't argue, not yet anyway and I beg him to. I beg him to deny it. I beg myself to walk away so nothing has to change. "I know my son and I know when he loves."

His voice is a whisper, I hardly hear it. "She's thirteen years younger than me."

"The heart doesn't care for age."

"I'm not…"

"Look at me in the eyes. Tell the truth to someone at least. Get it off your chest. Admit it to yourself so we can fix this and fix your family."

There's another pause and I hear what sounds like hands on the counter.

"Tell me, my son, are you in love with Rose?" his mother asks once more.

"I can't help it. I try to help it but I can't. I've never… she's… she doesn't feel the same and nothing has ever happened between us."

OH MY GOD!

He's in love with me? Oh my God.

"I believe you, but now we have to fix this."

"How?"

"You have to let her go, for the health of your family. This is not fair on the woman you vowed a lifetime to."

My heart pangs again, she knew already, this is why she's okay with me quitting. She's his mother first and my friend second.

He sighs heavily. "I know but… I can control it. I've been in control of it."

"Desire cannot be controlled. You must put it out of sight. It is the

only way. Transfer her to somebody else, to a different branch. Before it is too late and you both do something that will destroy everything you've built." I hear her step forward. "Rose is very sweet, very naïve, and right now she's looking for comfort. She has been through so much. Don't add an illicit affair to her list of problems."

"She wouldn't, she doesn't see me that way."

"For your sake, I hope that's true."

"It is."

"Remove her before it's too late."

"I don't think I can. It might destroy me."

His words have me staggering back. I might destroy him by leaving? What a weight on my conscience. Why did I have to stay and listen?

I rush away, trying to be quiet as I head back up to my room, pacing and clicking my fingers.

"Are you okay?" Mr. C asks, standing in the doorway. How long has he been there? Does he know what I heard? "You've been pacing for a while."

"I'm okay," I breathe, still clicking my fingers. He takes a step towards me and I take one back.

"Mom made breakfast."

"I'll be down soon."

I take another step back when he takes another step forward. When he realizes I'm not going to allow him to approach, he scratches the handsome stubble on his jaw and shoves his hands in the pockets of his dark jeans.

"Take your time," he mutters and leaves.

I can breathe again.

There is so much drama going on in my life right now and all of it centers around WhyTech, Pax, and Mr. C. I'll be devastated to leave but I think it's best. I might even use what money I've saved to go elsewhere. Leave LA and maybe even head to NYC or Washington. There are other WhyTech branches there. Maybe Robert knows somebody looking for a PA?

I'll make the hard choice for him, I'll decide.

I pull out my laptop and start typing out my notice ready for work tomorrow.

I've got enough saved to keep me going for a while and I decided last night to get the money from insurance for my car. There's no use buying a new one until I know where I'm going and what I'm doing.

This is going to kill me.

Why am I being punished for the minds of others?

I head downstairs after brushing my teeth and getting dressed. I've been stalling, taking my time.

Luckily, when I enter the kitchen, everybody is sitting around a large round table. By everybody I mean, Izabella, Mario, Mrs. Conti, Maria, and Ezra.

"Morning," Izabella calls and Maria comes rushing to me to give me a hug.

"Morning," I reply, hugging the girl back. I don't meet their eyes as I take my seat.

"You look like you've had a rough couple of days," Mrs. Conti tells me, her polite way of saying I look like shit.

"I made you a card." Maria hands me a beautifully crafted handmade card with the words,

"Sorry you're sad"

This time I smile for real. "I'm not sad. Not now that you're here."

She hugs me again and I catch Ezra's eyes over her shoulder but quickly look away. I notice Mrs. Conti put her hand on his and watch him bring it to his lips and kiss it. Maria returns to her seat and I pick at a piece of bacon on my plate beside poached eggs.

"You should eat," Izabella instructs softly.

"You didn't eat on the plane yesterday or at the airport," Ezra points out, frowning at me.

"Keeping tabs on her, are you, husband?" Mrs. Conti asks, raising a brow at her husband and Izabella looks down at her plate.

"Yes," he replies simply, and she pulls her hand from his.

Already I'm causing issues and I haven't even done anything yet.

I retract that yet and end that sentence on anything.

"So, your car…"

"Already sorted," Mario announces looking proud, "we got a cleaning crew to tackle the paint too."

"And she's going to stay here until he's dealt with," Ezra insists.

"How are you so sure it's him?" Izabella asks. "Are there no other suspects?"

"I don't have enemies," I mutter. "He's the only one. Though it does seem a bit desperate even for him."

"Psychotic men are capable of anything," Mrs. Conti puts in, shrugging her shoulders.

"True."

It just all feels so surreal.

"Thank you for all your help. I don't know what I would have done…"

"Anytime, sweet girl." Izabella holds my hand and Mario winks at me.

Mrs. Conti glares at me from across the table, though she schools

her features when I look at her. I don't think she realizes I probably have better eyesight than she does now. My peripheral vision is amazing, but I think that has a lot to do with my photographic memory.

"You're not going to be able to take me to soccer practice," Maria cries and I realize in this moment just how much I'll be giving up for Mr. Conti's family and future.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Four

He's in love with me. ME.

My life is in shambles and Pax has been suspended while HR investigate. He hasn't contacted me yet but I'm waiting for it. People are gossiping, everybody has heard about my car and apartment. I feel like the hot topic which isn't a good thing.

I miss my invisible days when nobody cared what I was doing or where I was going.

I've spent the past two nights at Izabella's and since yesterday morning at breakfast I haven't seen Ezra. He followed his wife and child to their marital home and left me with Mario to discuss my uncertain future. I feel like I'm in a limbo right now. Until Pax is prosecuted for what he's done, I'll never find peace.

I was naughty and used Ezra's contact list to get in touch with Robert. I'm hoping he'll think he owes me one after I let him crash in my room that night.

"Hello?" he asks.

"Hi, it's Rose."

"Hey, baby, how you been?"

"Ugh, don't call me baby," I murmur and he laughs. "I'm calling because I wanted to see if you knew any megalomaniacs in need of a PA."

"Oh shit, you're actually quitting then?"

I sigh. "I don't really have a choice."

"It's a bit of a mess, isn't it?" he admits and blows a raspberry. "I'm sorry you're having to give up a job you love because some dickhead can't keep his hands to himself."

"Two, technically," I reply, trying to make a joke of it. "Did you hear what happened to my car?"

"I just spoke to Cunty about it this morning," he replies. "You've got it rough right now."

"You have no idea," I respond, sitting at my desk and mentally preparing myself for the day ahead. "Ask around for me, okay?"

"What area?"

“Any.”

“In Los Angeles?”

“No, in America.”

He whistles long and low. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“There’s nothing here for me anymore. I’m handing in my notice today.”

“Good luck with that.” He clears his throat. “I’ll find you something, don’t worry, okay?”

“Thanks, Robert.”

“No problem, baby.”

Laughing gently, I hang up the phone and tap the envelope on my desk.

“Don’t be a coward,” I whisper to myself and stand, ready to face Mr. Conti.

I knock on his office door and wait for his call before entering.

He smiles when he sees me, so bright and warm. I wonder how I didn’t see it. He was so good at being aloof but this entire time he harbored secret feelings for me. If only I hadn’t heard what they said in his mom’s kitchen, things would all be the same. I’d be oblivious the way I like it. I still don’t know why he came that night and so late.

Maybe I’ll ask him one day, for now I don’t want to stir the pot.

I place the thing on his desk, the thing that I want to snatch back, tear up, and toss in a fire. The thing that has been burning a hole in my soul since I wrote it.

“What’s this?” Mr. Conti asks, eyeing the letter on his desk with confused gray eyes. His eyes are the most wonderful eyes I’ve ever gazed upon.

“My two weeks’ notice.”

His face pales and his hands flatten on the desk. “Is this because of Pax, because he’s a fucking——?”

“It’s not because of Pax, well… not totally anyway,” I respond on a whisper, cutting him off. Feeling my eyes burn as I accept the end of an era.

“Then why?”

“You know why,” I breathe. I don’t want to blame him, but I also do. I’m mad at him for feeling anything other than what he’s supposed to feel.

“I don’t know why,” he answers, pushing his hands through his hair, looking at the letter again like it’s about to burst into flames. That’s how I’ve felt since I wrote it.

I don’t want him to say it out loud, not to me, because that will change everything. So I keep the subject professional. “I’ll help you find a PA before I go.”

“I don’t *want* a different PA,” he growls, standing, his hands still on

his desk.

"I know, but I promise whoever I find will be so good you'll for—"

"Forget all about you?" he spits, agitated now.

I nod softly. "I can't stay here. Not anymore, it's not safe for any of us."

"You're not doing this. Not because of him," he pleads, his tone desperate as he stalks towards me and I walk backwards. He grips my arms when my back touches the door, staring down into my wide eyes. Where his hands are, tingles and burning erupt under and over my skin. "You can't let him control your life; you have to fight."

Those are the exact things I thought Izabella would say. How wrong I was.

"I'm not leaving because of him," I snap.

"Right, nobody will believe that."

"It's true," I grit, annoyed that he'd question my honesty when I've never given him a reason to doubt it.

"So tell me why, so I can fix it."

"You can't fix it. This isn't something that will magically go away."

"Give me more than that, help me out here," he begs, still gripping my arms, ignoring my squirming. Does he not know what his touch does? "If it's not Pax then who? Is it money? You want a raise? It's yours. More days off? Yours. Just tell me why you're leaving me."

"Because of you!" I yell and his frown melts away to something else entirely. "I'm leaving because I can't work with you anymore."

"Why?"

"You *know* why," I whisper, my breathing staggered and the light dawns in his eyes. He gets it now. He knows I know.

"I told you that the kiss was just… it was a moment of weakness and cowardice and it'll never happen again."

I wet my lips and his eyes zone in on them. I've never been desired so desperately by anyone before. I can feel it radiating from him in waves.

"It's not about the kiss," I admit, my voice a breath. "This isn't good for anybody."

"So it is about the kiss?"

"No."

He looks so confused. "Then what is it? Tell me."

I place my hands on his chest and stare at the top of his tie, wishing the ground would swallow us both whole and take us to a place where this is okay. "I know how you feel."

He blanches. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I murmur, feeling mortified and on the spot, "I heard you. Speaking to your mom. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, I swear."

"Fuck," he curses under his breath and turns away from me. "You

were never supposed… this wasn't… you don't have to resign because of *that*."

"We both know that I do. Your mom was right. You have to think of your family."

He turns back to me, shaking his head slowly, his eyes full of emotion. "I've never shown it. Never let you know. Never made an advance beyond the… just you know. Not on purpose."

"I know. Let's keep that record."

"I have a wife who I love with my whole heart."

Hearing him say it makes my chest ache painfully. "I know."

"But I love you with my whole soul," he admits, pressing his forehead to mine. My eyes fill with tears at his admission and my heart rips in two. "Don't leave me. I couldn't bear it."

"It's unfair on Mrs. Conti. It's unfair on me. It's definitely not fair on you."

"I can handle it."

"I can't," I admit, placing my hand on his chest and pushing until he takes a step back. "We'll still see each other sometimes, I'm keeping in touch with your mom, but I think it's best for us at this point to not be together all the time."

"Don't resign."

"It's done, Mr. Conti," I say his name with extra emphasis to remind him of it and who he shares it with. "I'll finish my two weeks as my contract states and then I'll be working somewhere else."

"Why? Does it really have to be this way? I've kept it hidden from you for this long. What's changed other than the fact it's out in the open?" His voice gets louder and louder and his hands cage me in at the door. "What are you so afraid of? I'm not going to come on to you or act inappropriately." He scans my face and repeats quietly now, "What are you so afraid of?"

I swallow the lump in my throat and wet my lips.

"Unless…" He trails his fingertips up my arm and his gray eyes flare with intrigue. "You're terrified you'll feel the same." His fingertips move along my collarbone and I shiver. "You're not quitting."

"I am." I shove him back full force this time, gathering my wits and willpower. "I have to go."

"No," he snaps and I squeak when his hand grabs a fistful of my hair. "If you're going to quit, it's going to be for a good fucking reason, and not because of a *what if*."

"Stop," I beg when he tilts my head back, his eyes blazing with possession, desire, and love.

He moves closer, sensing the need that I've been able to deny in a way he hasn't.

“Please don’t, there are only so many times I can say no,” I whisper.

“Before what?” His own voice is intensely quiet, his eyes on my mouth. “Before what, Rose?”

My breath catches in my throat. “Before I say yes.”

He pulls my face to his, meeting me in the middle and our bodies and lips collide.

I squeak through my closed mouth, startled by the sudden assault, but he pushes me against the door and devours my mouth. His tongue tastes my own when I gasp, and I can’t pull away. My brain is a mass of the desire he projected on me and my body is pulsing with it.

He groans, sounding pained when I slide my hands up his chest and kiss him back with equal fervor. I could barely turn him down the first time, I’m a lost cause this time.

I can’t catch a breath and I don’t need to. He’s my oxygen right now, my lifeline, keeping me anchored. Our bodies connected.

His hands drag across my curves, scraping around my back and hips, grasping at my flesh and holding me tight so I can’t escape.

I’m wet. So damn wet.

He groans again, pressing his erection into my navel while still kissing me, claiming me like I never have been before.

I’ve never felt so out of control before.

When he clicks the lock on the handle of the door all bets are off and I lose all sense of myself. I lose all sense of time and what I came here to say to begin with.

I forget his life and mine. I forget my morals and his. All I can think about is having him in a way I’ve been telling myself I don’t want him for far too long.

His hands desperately pull my skirt up, his lips still on mine, his breath coming from his nose. It gathers at my hips and he lifts me, wrapping my legs around his waist, still kissing me as though terrified if he stops, I might change my mind. I’m not sure I have the strength to change anything anymore.

Mr. Conti is my personal form of heroin and I’ve become addicted from the first hit.

He sets me on his desk, holding my thigh so I keep it hooked around him. I tug on his tie until it’s dangling. I grip both ends and use it to hold him closer to me as he frantically grasps at every part of my body that he can reach.

He tastes divine, better than I could have imagined, and his hair is so soft.

I start working on the buttons of his shirt and he shrugs it off, leaving his toned and glorious chest bare to my viewing pleasure. I break the kiss and stare into his eyes for a moment, we’re both

breathing heavily, lips swollen, hair a mess, eyes mirroring the pleasure we feel just by being free with each other after tearing down boundaries that should always be there.

When neither of us say stop, neither of us find the strength to end something that never should have started, he starts on the buttons to my shirt, undoing them slowly, one by one, revealing the white lace bralette that only just contains my round, shapely breasts.

His hands push my shirt open and his thumbs stroke over the swells of my breasts, lightly tickling the points of my nipples which are solid and poking through the sheer material.

He dips his head to kiss the curve of my breast, and then the other. I shiver, it feels so nice. I want him to kiss me everywhere. His large hands massage and manipulate them in a way that shoots straight to my sex.

I can hardly breathe.

He looks up at me again, and while kissing me softly and tenderly, he reaches for my hair, unwinding the knot so it spills down my back in a thick wave. I groan when he teases it free and starts to remove my shirt until it's on the floor by his.

I lean back on my hands, feeling thoroughly worshipped when he dives and kisses my ribs, hands looking for the zip of my skirt but losing that battle because of how scrunched it is.

I stand and find it at the back, undoing it and letting it fall to my ankles.

There's no going back now.

I've never wanted anything more than I want this.

I stand in front of him in lacy white underwear and stockings attached to a garter belt.

"Fuck," he breathes, looking down at me, taking time to explore my flesh with his hands. I've never felt sexier and more beautiful than I do right now, seeing it mirrored in his eyes. "Keep your heels on."

He lifts me again, putting me back on the desk.

I gasp when he swipes everything off it behind me and onto the floor, laptop included. He doesn't even glance at it to see if it's okay, he just guides me back onto the hard and unforgiving surface and touches me, as though committing every inch of me to his memory.

I writhe beneath his torturous touches, whimpering and moaning as he inspects me with his fingers and palms. Fingers hook around the top of my panties and pull them down. His lips kiss my stomach and then my curve that leads to the place that's raging with need while he carefully peels my panties over my heels.

I whimper when he kisses his way back up my body, stopping to look at me again, so exposed and vulnerable. I almost want to cover up.

“Has there ever been a woman more beautiful?” he asks, and I relax, feeling more comfortable in my own skin.

He grabs my hand and pulls me up to sitting. We kiss again, more desperately this time. Like when we first started. I’ve never wanted somebody inside of me like this before.

I push my hand between us and under the fabric of his pants. It’s a tight squeeze but I grasp his cock and balk at the size. He’s so thick, heavy, and solid in my hand. Like steel. Silky, hot, steel.

His answering groan is so primal and needy. He rips my hand free, back to being feral again and shoves his pants down, stepping out of them a moment later.

Pulling me to the edge of the desk, he lines himself up with me perfectly as my fingers find my clit and start to roll it in fast circles.

“No,” he whispers, pulling my hand away and replacing it with his thumb. “You touch yourself when you’re alone and thinking of me. When you’re with me, it’s my job to touch you and get you off.”

Oh my God.

He starts to sink inside and groans. I ache from his width, but it feels so good.

His thumb rolls my clit, using my own juices to make it slick.

He watches himself vanish into my body. I’ve never felt more connected to somebody than I do now.

“There are so many ways I’ve wanted to do this for so long… I want to hold you, press you into a bed, up a wall, watch you as you ride me, but I can’t take my eyes off you. I don’t want to miss a second of this. So I’m going to watch as I fuck you with your legs spread for me, a fucking fantasy come true.”

His words make me blush and whimper with ecstasy all at the same time.

He kisses me gently, savoring my lips as he holds himself inside of me to the hilt.

“Lie back,” he whispers, pressing on my chest with his hand until my back is arched against the cool wood and my hair is fanning around my face. “You’re stunning… and you feel like fucking heaven.”

I smile and squeeze him down below, making his eyes flutter closed.

He starts to thrust, slowly at first, then faster and more powerful. My body rocks on the desk and his thighs slap against my ass cheeks. He hooks my leg over his arm, keeping it high as his thumb circles that tiny bundle of nerves that is making me want to scream out in pleasure.

I’m close already. I can feel every part of his cock as he moves in and out of me and it is so fucking erotic.

He changes his pace and angle making it even more enjoyable.

Then I'm being yanked up again and his lips are on my neck as I pant and mewl. This is too much. I can hardly breathe. I dig my fingers into his back and tangle the rest in his soft hair.

"Kiss me," I beg, my voice hoarse and wanting.

He obliges, fucking my mouth with his tongue as I battle to stay in control of my body.

"Not yet," I breathe, feeling that familiar burning… except this feels more like a tsunami of crackling lava in my womb. My body feels weightless as he hammers into me, holding my body tight to him now. His thumb is no longer teasing my clit, yet I feel the tingles still, building and spiraling. There's just something about close sex, having a body against yours as he fills you up perfectly.

I throw my head back with a moan so loud he yanks me back to his mouth and kisses me until it passes. It takes forever and my body shudders with each powerful wave of my orgasm.

He follows shortly after, choking out a cry that I too smother with my lips.

These offices aren't known for being soundproof. We can't risk getting caught.

His thrusts slow, his body jerks, and then he stops completely and holds my body to his and presses his forehead to mine.

"Nine hundred and fifty-eight," I breathe, and he laughs gently.

"I hope that's a rating out of ten," he jests, knowing perfectly well what that number means, kissing me again like he just can't get enough.

I kiss him back but only for a moment, and then I pull away.

The reality of what we just did hits me as the euphoria ebbs away, taking with it my dignity and bringing with it a wave of pain.

"We have to get back to work," I sadly point out, feeling my eyes fill with tears as I stand, cringing at the mess between my thighs. I forgot to make him wear a condom. We are so fucking dangerous together. I never forgot with Pax. "You have a meeting in less than eight minutes."

"Don't quit," he begs on a pained whisper, chest rising and falling visibly. "Please… *don't leave me.*"

I know he doesn't mean the office, and is instead talking about something else entirely.

The tears fall and my shame sinks in. He wraps his arms around me from behind, desperate to hold on. But hold on to what?

I accept his embrace and his warmth for as long as time will allow. Then I pull free and enter the bathroom to clean myself up.

Things just got real and in a bad way. Today will mark the day that Mr. Conti cheated on his wife. And today will definitely mark the day that I fell in love for the first time.

We dress in silence, neatening each other up. I straighten his tie and push back his hair; he pulls my skirt up over my shirt, smooths it down my thighs, and wraps his arms around me to zip it up at the back. When his lips touch my jaw, I giggle because it tickles and immediately feel shame for finding joy with him after such a sordid act.

He kisses my lips, biting and sucking at my lower one, smiling too like he never has before.

"I adore you," he breathes, kissing me firmer immediately afterwards. "Everything about you."

"I adore you too," I reply, feeling my eyes fill with tears again.

"We'll talk later, okay? After work."

I nod, pulling him back to me for another kiss. I don't want to lose this feeling yet, *not yet*. The euphoria of the most incredibly intense sex I have ever had in my life and probably ever will have is still lingering and though the shame is there it doesn't outweigh how amazing I still feel.

He hums against my mouth, gripping the curve of my back. He's hard again, his cock throbs impatiently between us.

There's a knock at the door forcing us to rip apart.

I open it, smiling at his business associate. After I've greeted him, I turn back to Mr. C and watch him tear up the envelope that I put back on his desk after helping him pick up his belongings before we dressed. He said he wanted to see me in my lingerie for as long as possible. I granted him that wish.

He tosses the remnants of my resignation into the trash and winks at me after looking me up and down with heavy eyes. I feel thoroughly undressed and caressed again.

"Morning, Mr. Freeman. It has been a while."

I leave his office, leaving them to their business.

I'm still throbbing between my thighs. How is that possible?

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Five

Our bodies fit perfectly together.

"Hungry?" Ezra asks after leaving his office with his briefcase in his hand and his jacket slung over his arm.

I nod. I'm not actually all that hungry but we do need to talk.

He winks at me and nods for me to follow him.

I was going to anyway, he's my ride since I have no car.

We walk side by side to the elevator, I tap on my phone, finishing a few things that I didn't get a chance to finish today.

He doesn't stand close to me, doesn't touch me, doesn't speak to me. It's as though now that we've had sex, everything has become taboo in public.

"What do you feel like eating?" he asks, and desire flares up in me again.

"I don't mind. I'm not really hungry."

"I'm starving," he answers, grinning at me. He looks so content and boyish, like he just had the best birthday of his life, age nine. "Tacos?"

"Sure," I murmur, and the elevator doors open. He guides me out with a hand on the small of my back and even just that touch feels so forbidden and arousing. As if sensing it too he glances at me, his smile gone, another more feral look in its place.

"Or we could skip dinner," he suggests as we walk through the crowded lobby. Everybody is leaving for the day.

"We should discuss the… umm… offer that we received today. Dinner sounds like a good place to discuss it."

"Okay, Miss Cryptic," he mutters in my ear. I shove him away from me, laughing, feeling a little bit more like the version of me before I had sex with my married boss on his desk like so many fucking fantasies on the internet. "Should we make our own code?"

"Absolutely not," I hiss, feeling panicked. I bite hard on my lip and click my fingers continuously. He allows it, likely daring not to touch my hand in front of everybody who knows who he is and that he's married. Before, when we casually touched, it was innocent, there was nothing going on so if people questioned it our answers would be

genuine. Now though… now if people question it, we'd have to lie.

It's insane how just one action can flip your entire relationship into something totally different.

We make our way to his car in silence which is parked at the front of the lot. He has his own reserved space by the building. I have my own next to his. Or I did, when I had a car.

He opens my door for me and waits for me to climb inside, then rushes around to his. We sit for a moment, watching other cars line behind us, their headlights blinding me in the rearview mirror.

"You look distraught." And he has finally broken the silence, with the wrong word.

"Confused," I correct, "conflicted, ashamed, angry, sad…"

His face falls. "That bad, huh?"

"But also, elated, relieved, passionate…"

"I th—"

"I'm terrified too. Of you. Of me."

"Of us?"

"Why'd you have to be married?" I whisper as though saying it any louder will make others hear it too. We're alone in the car, but I'm still worried somebody might hear us. "I can't have an affair with you, Ezra."

Our eyes connect, his almost a darker gray in this low lighting but no less vibrant. "Me neither. I can't… I don't want to hurt Elizabeth." He rubs his face with his hands and rests his head back as far as the headrest will allow.

"I know."

"But I don't want to lose you."

I squeeze his hand on the gear stick. "I know. But…" I notice Pax walking out of the building and towards the parking lot. "Drive. Let's talk about this somewhere else."

He glares at Pax as he backs out of his space and drives us to location unknown. Pax doesn't even glance our way, I'm not sure he saw us.

"I'm leaving your mom's tomorrow, I'm going home."

"Oh? Are you sure that's safe?"

I nod. "The police called today after we umm…"

"Did the number six."

I giggle snort and slap his thigh. "Oh God. I knew that's what you meant that night in the hotel."

"I was just teasing you."

"It wasn't teasing, it was torture."

"You felt it too?"

I look at his profile as he drives. "Felt what?"

"The chemistry between us."

I roll my eyes and try not to laugh. “I didn’t peg you as poetic, Mr. Conti.”

“I’m a romantic at heart.”

“So you believe in true love?” I’m joking when I ask but when he looks at me his eyes are serious and his posture has tensed.

“I didn’t—"

I slap my hand over his mouth. “Don’t you dare say something super corny right now.”

He laughs loudly, not upset in the slightest. Then he brings my hand back to his lips and kisses it, reminding me of when he did that to his wife. I pull it away and tap it on my thigh, my shame resurfacing. “I didn’t expect that to happen.”

“It wasn’t exactly on my list of things to do for the day either.”

“I didn’t realize you felt the same way, I honestly thought you’d slap me. Or was it just… *sex* for you?” His eyes flicker to me and then back to the road.

“I’m not answering that question. It’s better left in the past with the number six.”

We fall silent for a while because we both know how wrong this is. How can we even try to justify this with words when there’s the chance that so many people are going to get seriously hurt.

“You know this can never happen again,” I say firmly, and he grips my thigh and slides his hand up my skirt. I inhale sharply and grab his wrist to stop this torture. “I’m serious, Ezra.”

“I love it when you say my name,” he mumbles as his hand slides even higher, reaching the edge of my stockings. “Do you always wear underwear like this?”

“Stooop,” I beg, my tone happy and long as I try to push his hand away.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” I gasp, gripping the seat either side of my thighs when he strokes my slit through my panties with a strong finger. “Don’t… anybody could see.”

“We’re in a moving car,” he points out, amused.

“We could crash and die.”

He has to remove his hand to turn a corner and I quickly pull my skirt back down and blow out a calming breath. “We need to go somewhere quiet so we can talk.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” I state simply. “I don’t want to talk. I just want to draw a line under it and move on.”

He frowns, his handsome face looking frustrated. “You didn’t enjoy yourself?”

“What?” I blink at him, jaw dropping, and eyebrows raised. “Are you crazy? Did you not… were you not in the room? This isn’t about

whether I enjoyed it or not. It's about the fact that I just helped you cheat on your wife and you're acting like you don't even have one."

Finally the realization of the reality of all of this sinks in and his face contorts with pain. "Elizabeth… God… I."

"Exactly," I mutter and look out of the window.

"I forget about my life when I'm with you. How terrible is that?"

"Extremely." I say the word but truly my heart skips a beat at his admission. I have that much power over him. The power to make him forget. I can relate.

"I've wanted you for so long… I didn't stop to really think about this."

"You have to go home to your wife, and you haven't been able to shower after what we did," I whisper, sounding and feeling as pained as he looks. "And I'm going to have to sit beside her and listen to her talk about her life, knowing that I have the power to rip it apart." I twist my hands in my lap. "I don't feel good about this. This isn't the kind of person I ever wanted to be."

He pulls over suddenly, almost going straight into the back of a parked car and then he presses his forehead to the steering wheel. I give him a moment to deal with his emotions.

After a few minutes I place my hand on his shoulder and he sits back up, his eyes troubled and confused. "I'm a selfish fuck."

"We both are."

"Oh my God, what have I done?" He suddenly starts cursing in a string of Italian, I hear Maria's name in his anguished rant that I don't understand. "I'm taking you home."

I don't say anything. How can I? It pains me to see him so conflicted.

"What are you going to do?" I ask softly, placing my hand on his thigh.

"I don't know. Probably nothing. I just… Elizabeth. It will hurt her."

I wet my lips. "It was one time. Yes, it was bad of us, extremely so. But don't tell her. Don't rip your family apart because of a moment of weakness. Don't let me be the reason Maria ends up in the middle of an ugly custody battle."

He gazes at me with tormented eyes and holds my hand. "It wasn't a moment of weakness. You're not a regret or a mistake."

"Then what am I? Your dirty little secret? Your second best?"

"You'll never be anybody's second best." He cups my cheeks, sorrow etched in his features. "I don't know how to fix this."

"There is no fixing it. What's done is done."

"No. Not fix *that*. I mean fix it so I don't have to lose you."

"You don't belong to me," I snap, my voice takes on a higher,

desperate tone.

"No… but I want to."

I kiss him before I can stop myself, tasting his tongue, feeling his lips, holding on to his hair and yanking until he growls from the pain. He returns the passionate forbidden kiss with equal fervor, gripping my hair and pulling me as close as the console between us will allow.

I rip away, panting, feverish, and deliriously aroused. "You're a drug, Ezra. A bad one."

"I could say the same about you."

"Go home to your wife, Mr. Conti." I check my belt and then my face in the mirror while he does the same, though he also adjusts the huge lump in his pants.

A stab of pain lances through me, slicing my heart to pieces when I think of him in another woman's bed tonight. The woman he promised himself to. A woman who will never be me.

"This can't ever happen again." I'm trying to be the voice of reason, figuring if I say it out loud it will manifest. "My two weeks' notice stand."

"Like hell they do." He puts the car in drive. "You're not going anywhere."

"Ezra… please be reasonable."

"I am being reasonable," he snaps. "You're the best PA I'll ever have. I'm not losing you because I'm in love with you. We're stronger than that."

He said the words… my heart aches.

"Think about it from Elizabeth's shoes. If you were her and you found out she fucked and loved somebody else and continued to work with them every day, what would you do? How would you feel?"

"She's not going to find out because we're not saying anything. What's done is done."

"Would you want to know if she—"

"I don't know," he barks, twisting his hands on the steering wheel and flicking up the signal before pulling out. "I don't know. I just know I don't want to hurt her or my family. Especially Maria."

"I know. I'm not going to say anything."

He rips a hand through his hair and curses some more in Italian.

"I'm sorry I ever put you in this position," he says to me after a moment and I kiss him again, unable to resist, he hums softly, unable to say no too.

After a moment we part and just look at each other in the dark.

"Let's go." I cup his cheek and smile, wishing I felt like this about *any* other man. Pax not included. "We're still friends, right?"

"I hope so. The ball in this case is in your court."

Now we just have to figure out how to actually stay friends that

don’t touch. It’s going to be hard.

He’s thinking the same thing; I can tell when he cuts into the silence between us. “Don’t quit your job. Not on my account. We can do this. We can go back to how things were.”

“The problem isn’t if we can do it, it’s if we want to do it.”

“If only there was a switch to be flipped.”

“I was thinking that exact thing.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Six

We have so much fun together.

"Can we talk?" Pax asks, his eyes weary and dark.

I shake my head and keep moving. So many heavy conversations as of late.

"Please."

"It's not going to change anything, Pax," I reply, frustrated and tired of this. I just want it over.

"I still love you."

I pick up my pace, heading for the deli I usually get lunch from.

"Don't fucking ignore me. I'm tired of you ignoring me!"

"Stop shouting at me," I grit, turning to face him now, tapping the tips of my fingers against my thighs. "I said leave me alone. You fucked up my car, my building…"

"I just…" He looks at the people who are walking past us, looking at us with curious gazes, and grabs my arm, yanking me to the side of the building I was about to pass.

"GET OFF ME!" I shriek, readying myself to run.

"I JUST WANT TO TALK TO YOU!" he bellows in my face, slamming me hard up against the brick wall of a busy clothing store. My head throbs where it hits the wall, but he doesn't care about that. Neither does anybody else. Nobody steps in, of course they don't. I'm not their problem. "Please. Let's just talk."

"Fine… but in the deli. Okay?" I don't want to but right now I just need to get somewhere public with surveillance. My head hurts from where it hit the wall.

"Sure." He looks relieved and I feel it too. Relieved because he agreed.

We walk side by side to the last place we ate at before I broke up with him and he turned psychopathic. I'm twitching like crazy but trying to control myself. I don't want him to see that he has any kind of effect on me. He holds the door open, I'm not happy to see it so empty but then this is a late lunch so I suppose it can't be helped.

We move to the counter and to say this is strained would be the

understatement of the century. Though he looks entirely relaxed and smiles at the barista as I make my order.

"I've got this," Pax murmurs, pulling out his card.

"No," I say firmly, shaking my head at him. I don't want him thinking I owe him anything.

"I said I've got this," he repeats and the barista laughs, giving him flirtatious eyes. She's totally not seeing that I hate him. I'd say she can have him, but I wouldn't wish his kind of crazy on anyone. He taps his card against the machine after saying his order too.

I'm no longer hungry.

I dance my fingers on the table when he sits opposite me, counting in sixes until forty-eight. He lets me, smiling at me with that charming smile I loved once.

"I missed your little quirks," he says, pouting and placing his hand over mine.

I slide it free and continue tapping.

One, two, three, four, five, six, one, two, three four five, six…

"I miss you, I'm sorry about everything I did. I'm changing, I'm seeing a therapist." He looks at me earnestly. "Losing you really opened up my eyes."

"Being with you really opened up mine."

His smile falters but he doesn't get to comment because our number is called. He stands to get our lunch and drinks and I consider running.

Instead I pull out my phone and send a quick message.

Rose: Going to be late, Pax has me cornered in the deli.

Ezra: He's not supposed to go within a hundred yards of you! I'm on my way.

Rose: Don't, please. Let me handle this.

Ezra: I don't like this.

I don't get the chance to reply because he's snatching my phone from me. When he reads who I'm texting on the lock screen he glares at me and then slams my phone so hard on the table I just know the screen has cracked. The few people in here look over.

I sit back, stiff as a board as he slides my phone my way. I don't touch it. I don't want to provoke him.

"Sorry," he mutters. "It's just… you texting him when he's the reason we broke up… it makes me angry."

“He’s not the reason, Pax,” I respond gently, like speaking to a grizzly that is standing in the way of your exit. “You are. Your anger, paranoia, the things you did to my car and building. It’s not okay.”

“I’m getting better.”

“You just smashed my phone. You’re not getting better.”

“I’m trying, if we just could give it another go, maybe go on a couple of dates, even just as friends.” He reaches over and runs a finger down my cheek. I fight the urge to slap it away. I’m so anxious that both of my legs are bouncing. “I really do love you.”

“I know.”

“Then please, just… be there while I get the help I need.”

“How about, you get the help you need and then we’ll talk about being friends?” I’m lying, I want nothing to do with him ever again.

“But then you’ll move on to somebody else! I can’t stomach it. It makes me feel so fucking angry.”

I see the door open as he takes a bite from his food, able to still perform normal everyday things such as eating while in the middle of trying to intimidate me back into his life. That’s when you know a person is seriously messed up.

Ezra walks in panting as though he has been running and I give him a little shake of my head. Him stepping in is the last thing I need right now.

I’m surprised to see one of the security guards enter after him, he too is panting.

I look down at my bagel just as Pax looks behind him.

I’m surprised when he’s able to school his features and demeanor toward our boss. “Mr. Conti, it’s been a while.”

“It sure has, mind if I join you?” Ezra asks and a muscle ticks in Pax’s jaw. He sits beside me, casual and relaxed as Pax regards him and then me. He looks so handsome today in a white button-up and gray pants. He discarded his jacket this morning but kept his blue tie, I don’t know where that is now.

I’m hoping he hasn’t taken it off because he anticipated a fight.

Still… he looks so good. A welcome distraction in this mess of a situation.

It was hard to keep my hands to myself, but I buried myself in my work and stayed out of his office. When I did go in his office, I left the door open and opened the blinds. He barely even looked up from his desk. We haven’t spoken about last night either.

I lay awake all night wondering if he was going to tell his wife and wondering if I was about to be dragged out of bed by his mother.

I’m almost looking forward to going home, just to get away from all the people I have betrayed. But now, taking this situation into consideration, I’m wondering if going home is possible.

“What have you been doing lately, Pax?” Ezra asks, a smirk on his face and I notice that he has shaved just the edges of the stubble he’s been growing the past few days. He looks so good with a beard.

“Just working,” Pax replies, and I startle when Ezra reaches across and picks something out of the back of my hair. I’m not sure there was anything in there. What is he playing at?

Pax shifts uncomfortably. “I’m sure you’ve got plenty to be getting on with, Mr. Conti. I’ll have Rose back to her desk in no time.”

“I’m good here.” Ezra glares at Pax, a clear challenge if I ever saw one.

Pax looks at me, pleading with me with his eyes but then it dawns on him. “You told him to come.”

“I told him I’d be late, I didn’t tell him to come,” I respond honestly. “You make me nervous, Pax.”

“You’re also prohibited from coming within a hundred yards of her.” Ezra flicks a piece of something from his arm. He’s so chilled out. “You’ve gone against work rules.”

“I’m not in the building.”

“It doesn’t apply to only within the building,” Ezra seethes, pulling my seat back with one hand, with me in it. “I’m going to escort Ms. Sinclair back to her desk, you’re going to stay away from her, or I’ll fire you. Is a woman really worth your job? You’re the best PR manager that we have ever had. Don’t ruin a good thing.”

“Is she really worth your marriage?” Pax hisses, narrowing his eyes on Ezra who tenses beside me. “Is she worth your life?”

“Is that a threat?”

They sneer at each other for a moment longer until Pax stands and tips the table just enough to spill both the drinks our way. The table slams back down and Ezra and I pull back from the spill as his security guard grabs Pax by the back of the neck and drags him from the building.

“Thought you weren’t fucking him, Rose?” he yells over his shoulder as I use napkins to wipe the coffee that spilled all over my lap. Thank heavens it wasn’t hot.

“He’s disturbed,” Ezra mutters and thanks the barista as they bring over cloths for us to clean up with. He looks at me and takes my hand in his. “Are you alright?”

I pick up my phone and show him the shattered screen. “Nope.”

“You need to report this to the police.”

“Yep,” I whisper, still holding his hand. “I stink of coffee.”

“Me too.” He guides me out of the deli with a hand at my back. “Let’s get cleaned up.”

“You have that method meeting in less than two hours.”

“Fuck the meeting, Rose. You’re shaking.”

He's right, I am shaking. "He scares me."

"I want you to stay at my mom's place for a while longer. Until you're safe."

If he wasn't married, he'd have been able to stay with me. "I'll be fine." My words are a lie, I'm not sure I will be fine, but I can't live with his parents forever, not while this guilt consumes me from the inside out.

"Please," he begs on a whisper. "Just until we figure this out. I'll get my dad to call the mayor, pull a few strings and hopefully get him locked up where he belongs."

"It's not that simple," I look down at my coffee-stained white shirt and blow out a breath.

"You're staying at my parents'. You don't even have a phone."

"I'm not," I snap, looking around to make sure nobody is listening. "I'm going home. If you want me to be safe so bad, then stay with me."

His eyes flare, the gray flashing with excitement. "You know I would if I could."

"I need to get out of these clothes."

When he raises a brow, I flick him on the forehead. "You know what I mean. Jerk."

"I'd like a demonstration."

"You're okay, you have spare clothes in your office. I don't have anything." I sigh and pull on the bottom of my shirt again. This is torture. "I'm going to keep a spare in my desk from now on."

"Does that mean you're not quitting?"

I flick his head again making him wince and grab my hand with a big grin on his face. "Stay on topic."

"Right… clothes."

We head across the road to a small boutique and I pick out some light jeans and a sky-blue shirt. There is no formalwear but considering the circumstances I think I'll get off without a warning this time.

I'm not even sure if these clothes will fit. I hope so. I went up a size just in case. It's not like I can try them on while I'm all gross and wet in the bad way.

We head back to the office, ignoring everybody on the way. My clothes feel tight and uncomfortable, the coffee is damp and sticky. This is hell on earth for me.

The second I'm in his office I head to the en suite and strip out of my clothes. I don't pay Ezra any mind because I'm silently freaking out.

He locks his office door; I hear the telltale click. Then his footsteps pad closer slowly as I use a wet flannel on my body, leaving a pool of

water on the tiles beneath my feet.

“I watched you do this before,” he murmurs, leaning against the doorjamb, his shirt on the floor with my soiled clothes. His chest is as chiseled as a statue… his body like Brad Pitt in Troy. One of my favorite movies… ahem.

I’m so lost in how he lets his trousers drop, revealing his massive erection, that I almost forget what he said.

“What?”

“Halloween,” he mutters coming closer, stopping when his glorious chest is against my back and his cock is trapped between us, separated by a thin layer of fabric. “I was in my office having a breather when this big, inflatable—"

“Sex doll.”

He chuckles. “—T-rex came inside, inebriated. She went into my personal bathroom, turned on the light and rid her delectable body of what little clothing she had on.” His hands wrap around my waist which is damp from where I just cleaned it.

“I’m so glad I didn’t need to pee,” I grumble, and he laughs at our reflections, his chin on my bare shoulder. “I thought we weren’t doing this anymore?”

“We’re not,” he whispers, biting my ear and slipping his hand into the front of my damp panties. Damp because I was hoping they’d wash, and I wouldn’t have to go commando for the rest of the day. Also damp because just looking at him makes me gush like a waterfall. “We’re never doing this again.”

His finger sinks into me and then drags the moisture back to my clit.

I moan, tilting my head back, giving him space to bite and lick the skin of my neck.

“Never again,” I breathe, “it can’t happen.”

“We’re not doing anything,” he replies, his tone hushed too. The way his breath fans across my sensitive flesh has me gripping the counter for support. “Nothing at all.”

His solid length presses against my ass, trapped by the fabric of his boxers. He tugs them down and I feel his skin against mine.

“Nothing,” he grits as I close my legs around it, squeezing it between the apex of my thighs.

He starts thrusting, finding grip between my pussy lips. My wetness makes him slide back and forth with ease, so he removes his hand and massages my breasts instead. He hits my clit every time and I almost scream with the ecstasy of it.

Why does sex feel this good with him? Why do we connect like this?

“I want you inside of me so bad,” I plead, reaching between us to

try and get him to adjust his angle. “Please.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he pants as he lifts my leg, ducks down a bit, and then thrusts all the way in without hesitation.

“Ezra,” I breathe, putting my knee on the vanity’s edge.

“Look at me.”

My eyes open slowly and find his in the mirror. His large hands massage my swaying breasts and pinch my nipples.

“What are we doing?” he asks me breathlessly, his eyes dangerous, his lips terse.

“Nothing,” I reply, crying out when a wave of pleasure hits me. I want to come so hard.

He cups my throat and pulls me back against his body. It’s a good thing my balance isn’t terrible, though to be honest he’s doing most of the work, including holding me steady.

“Exactly. Nothing.” His thrusts get faster and more powerful, he plays with my clit, rubbing it furiously in time with each push.

I tremble and spasm and then, finally, I orgasm so hard my leg buckles. I catch myself on the vanity, whimpering with pleasure, tears spring to my eyes as he cries out his own release, throbbing inside of me. His cock feels like it’s on fire as I pulse and clench around him.

He cages me in, both hands gripping the sink, eyes holding mine in the mirror.

We communicate without words, separating and cleaning each other like longtime lovers, not new ones.

We share a gentle kiss and get dressed in new clothes before heading back to work, acting like nothing happened.

Because it didn’t.

Nothing happened.

I push it out of my mind, forcing the shame down with it and file another police report.

At the end of the day, I meet Ezra in his office before leaving for the day and he drives me to his parents’ house. He kisses my forehead at their door, letting his lips linger but we don’t even utter the words goodbye.

The following morning, I pack what few things I have at Izabella and Mario’s and say a teary goodbye.

Erika gives me a ride home, chatting animatedly about her partner the entire way there.

What a lovely family.

A family that will never be mine.

A family that Elizabeth doesn’t appreciate but has anyway. Why is

life so cruel to those of us with nothing already?

An hour later, being the coward that I am, I go to Laurie's, curl up in her bed and cry until her tics make me laugh again.

What a shameful web I've woven.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Seven

He always makes me laugh.

"There's a package for you," Laurie calls from the other side of her apartment. "It has a yummy man attached to it."

"Hey," Kyle whines from somewhere else in the apartment. I love how strong they're both going, and how supportive of each other they are. I wish Pax had been like that. Perhaps I'd have been in love with him now instead.

"You're yummier, babe."

"I beg to differ," Mr. Conti rumbles.

"You're early!" I shout but I'm smiling. "Way too early."

"I have a gift."

"Oooh, I like gifts, bring it in. I'm decent."

Not even Laurie knows about the *nothing* that *didn't happen* between Mr. Conti and myself and it sucks because I can't tell her either. One, I'm pretty sure she'd be super pissed at me and maybe fall out with me altogether and, two, she'd accidentally shout it out in her tics.

Laurie and secrets are not a good mix.

I need to make more friends. Not that Laurie isn't incredible, but just because I only have a few acquaintances and no people with real substance in my life. It's my fault for being so weird. Kidding.

Although I don't know how many people will want to be friends with me if they found out I did *nothing* with a married man.

"You say bring it in but bring it in to where?" he asks, chuckling as he moves through the one-story apartment.

"That way, stud," Laurie tells him and then giggles.

"Laurie, stop flirting with my boss."

"Yeah, Laurie," Kyle adds, "stop it."

Laurie giggles all the way to Kyle just as Mr. Conti appears in my doorway.

I eye him hungrily. For lack of better words to describe him… he looks so incredibly sexy. His hair has been cut and is styled slightly to the side, his beard is slightly longer and razor sharp on the edge of his

jaw and cheekbones, he's the sexiest man on earth and he's cheating on his wife for me.

For me.

Fuck.

I don't swear much because I don't like to, but I felt a need for it then.

I'm such a hypocritical contradiction of a woman. I'm mad at myself for what I'm doing to his wife, all the while praying he never stops wanting me. I glance around him to see if anybody is looking and kiss his lips, keeping my eyes on his while they stay connected.

He smiles and returns it, delicately touching my waist.

I pull back and see a box wrapped in a plain, white paper bag.

"What's this, I wonder?" I snatch it from him then carefully empty the contents onto my borrowed bed. I see the state-of-the-art Android phone logo and model on the box and blink twice. "This is a really expensive gift."

"So was adding Laurie to that flight to Vegas but you didn't complain then."

I glare at him playfully. "You said that was on the company."

"Who owns the company?"

Fair point.

I pick up the box and carefully remove the stiff sleeve. "Thank you, Ezra."

"What is it?" Laurie asks and I grin when I see her lipstick smeared around her mouth. It's a good thing I'm not wearing lipstick yet. "Oh, dude… that's so fucking cool. BACON PHONE RINGS!"

"Bacon doesn't do that," I mutter absentmindedly as I unbox my new gadget.

"I know that, you massive whore," Laurie comments, still grinning as I hold the phone and feel its weight. "You need a sturdy case and screen protector before you break it." She looks at Mr. Conti and then yanks on her own hair. "Fuck… ouch… stupid hand… THREEWAY WITH SIGNOR CONTI!"

Her hand slaps her mouth, on purpose this time. I fall back on the bed laughing, clutching my new phone to my chest.

"NO!" Kyle bellows, pushing past Mr. Conti and then stopping in his tracks when he realizes who it is. "Oh my God… my boss is in my girlfriend's apartment." He shakes his hand, awed. "I work in your finance department, I'm the one that delegates money to staff."

"I always get my pay on time so you must be killing it," I put in, smiling at Kyle.

He stops shaking Ezra's hand and grins at me. "We should totally double date sometime."

I wave my hand between Ezra and me, "Oh, we're not—"

“Set up a thing and I’ll see what I can do,” Ezra responds, not correcting him.

“She’s his PA and like, *weird friend*, they’re not dating,” Laurie explains, ushering her lovestruck bae out of the room.

“Was I over the top?” I hear him whisper as he leaves and Ezra’s lips twitch.

“You didn’t correct him.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Going for dinner to celebrate an employee’s success over the years is a good reason—”

“To lie to your wife,” I finish for him.

“To spend more time with you,” he corrects but I’m not seeing a difference. “Don’t… it kills me every time your smile disappears because of what we…”

I brush it off. “Not here. Don’t talk about it. Not here, not anywhere.”

Because when I say it out loud, I can’t ignore it. When we’re forced to converse about it, I definitely can’t ignore it and that means we have to make a decision. The longer we go finding excuses not to talk about it, the longer we can pretend it only happened once.

“I’m going, Kyle’s driving me to work.” Laurie grins, grabbing hold of Mr. C so she can look around his dominating frame at me. “Love you. Have fun, kids. Use a condom.”

“Laurie,” I whine. She’s just trying to embarrass me in front of my boss, not realizing how close to the mark she is. My phone powers up, I put it on charge and use my forefinger to set it up.

The second the front door closes, his mouth is on mine and I can’t breathe. Though it’s the best way to starve of oxygen for definite.

“I’m trying to play,” I hiss, batting at his hands that are reaching under my skirt.

“Me too,” he mutters, shrugging off his jacket and yanking off his tie. Thank heavens for clip-ons.

“No…” I hiss, standing up and fighting with his hands. We look like freaking insects doing a mating dance. “Stop… not here. I don’t want our first time in a bed to be in my best friend’s bed. It’s weird.”

“But…” He looks down and so do I and I smirk when I see the bulge, hot and ready for me to make it feel better. “It hurts.”

“How about I kiss it better instead?” I whisper, biting on his lower lip. His eyes flare as his hands work his belt, pulling it free.

I drop to my knees, resting back onto my feet as I yank his pants down a little more and stare at it in the eye. It’s so big, and thick, I kind of want to compare it to cylindrical objects around the house.

I kiss the tip and grin up at him when he groans. I love the noises he makes when I’m making him feel good.

“I need to tell you something,” he says just as I wrap my lips

around his solid, swollen head.

I pop free, keeping a grip on the base, and blink up at him. “Can it wait?”

“Uh-huh,” he chokes, and I take him back into my mouth.

I’m going to need to redo my hair and makeup by the time I’m done, my eyes are watering already. I fuck him with my mouth fast and furiously, sucking him, licking him, taking as much of him as I can. I play with his balls and rub his thighs with my fingers, all the while listening to him come undone.

“Tits,” he croaks, getting closer to the edge every second. “I want to come on your gorgeous fucking tits.”

“You sure? I was totally gonna let you come in my mouth.”

His eyes fly down to mine, wide and full of longing. I don’t get a chance to take a breath before he’s pushing past my lips again and coming on my tongue with an animalistic growl. I take him all, every ounce of him, salty, sweet, different. But that’s just him, he’s different. Not that I’ve sucked much cock. I gave Pax head quite often, but I never let him come in my mouth.

There’s just something about this man that has me wanting to keep impressing him.

“Two hundred and twelve,” I state before he collapses onto the bed, a panting mess of a man that I just satisfied in less than five minutes.

“I think I’m dead,” he mutters and sits up, his eyes hazy and satisfied.

I do that *kiss the fingers* thing that Italian’s do when discussing good food and he laughs so hard he falls back onto the bed and tears leak from his eyes.

“I fucking love you,” he says through his laughter, pulling me onto his lap after sobering a little.

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?”

His smile slowly fades, only to be replaced with something more somber.

“I’ve always been faithful,” he implores as his hand strokes my cheek. “I don’t just fuck every woman I meet. Before you, there was no one else. You’re not just some notch on my bed post or whatever goes through your head when I leave you at night. I mean, I’m a normal human so of course I’ve thought about it, but I never have. You’re—”

“I’m different, right?” I ask, frowning at him. “You know how cliché that sounds?”

“It’s true, remember that night we stayed up in my hotel just talking until the sun rose? And you told me that story about how you tried to save that dog from drowning, but it turned out to be a

mannequin head?"

I nod, it was a good night. A very good night. We'd been working but stopped and started talking, and the conversation just flowed. So did the laughter and the banter and the… flirting. I can't claim innocence at all. I flirted with him, though not intentionally. It was just a normal response to being in the presence of a funny and attractive guy.

This was back before I had laser eye surgery.

"I realized then how… *amazing* we are together."

"What does that have to do with me saving a wig on a plastic head?"

"I don't know, probably how cute you were, how typical it was of you."

"I saved a sea turtle somewhere," I grumble, making him laugh.

"You're just so adorable."

"You make me sound like a puppy," I jest as I brush the backs of my fingers down his chest. "But… it was Christmas for me, I think. I denied it but whenever you walked away from me you left me with butterflies in my stomach and a racing heart." I press his hand to my chest and then press mine to his. "Did you know if you sit next to somebody you love for long enough your hearts synchronize?"

"Ours synchronized the day we met, and you walked into my office all cute as a button, with your huge glasses and hideous plaid blazer with elbow patches. I knew the moment I laid my eyes on you that you were going to turn my world upside down. I just never imagined it could be like this." He smiles a blinding, toothy smile at me until I kiss it from his face. When we come up for air he continues, "I shouldn't love you like I do. It's not fair."

"I know."

"Just hang on tight, okay? While we figure this out."

I don't know what he means by that but I'm hanging on for dear life.

It feels wrong going with Izabella to take Maria to soccer practice, especially when for the past few days, not including the weekend just gone, I've been all over her son. Nobody seems to know or suspect a thing, but then why would they? We've been working together for a long time now, and to outsiders, nothing in our professional relationship has changed. The only difference is now he picks me up before work and drops me off at home.

The only interaction I've had with his wife about this was when she asked me to ask her husband to remember her dry cleaning on

Friday.

That was an awkward conversation to say the least. I texted it to him, I can't bear to say her name or speak of her to him. It's easier just pretending he's single.

I think he feels the same because he doesn't mention her either. Though we often talk fondly of Maria. I've missed this girl so much.

"She says you usually get pizza and ice cream afterwards?" Izabella asks as we watch the kids dribble their soccer balls around small plastic cones on the grass.

"Yep, always. Not the healthiest habit but it became one of my favorite weekly rituals. Sometimes we'd take Renee too, her closest soccer buddy, and then drop her home afterwards."

"You're really good to them, I can't imagine you get paid for this."

"I don't mind, and I often use Mr. Conti's credit card to pay for the pizza and dessert so…"

We share a laugh.

"As you should. I hear sometimes he joins you too?" Her tone is cautious and higher than usual.

"Sometimes, we went to the zoo once too. We're friends, I guess. Although I'm not about to start inviting him on nights out and Netflix marathons. It's too weird." I just pass it off like it's no big deal and add a little lie at the end. "I don't believe in mixing business with pleasure, friendship included. Especially not after Pax. Not that your son is anything like Pax."

"You're rambling," she points out, smirking at me and she looks so much like her son.

I'm sweating too, I think but definitely do not say.

"When you ramble it's because you're uncomfortable."

Ah she knows me well.

"I just panic, because Mr. Conti and I spend a lot of time together at work. People just don't seem to believe that a woman and a man can be friends without *benefits*. I find myself defending us a lot since Pax accused us of having an affair." That's the truth, except now my defenses are all lies, not like they used to be.

Izabella nods thoughtfully. "I can imagine it's not easy. You've been through so much lately."

The coach blows his whistle and makes the team line up. Maria waves at us so we both wave back.

I blow out a breath but Izabella's eyes remain on my profile, assessing me.

"Sometimes we seek comfort from those we shouldn't during hard times," she continues. "You wouldn't lie to me, would you?"

A lump the size of a bowling ball gets stuck in my throat.

I try so hard not to freak out, but I can't help it. My eyes are wide,

my hands clenching and unclenching. “I’m not a liar.”

Or at least, I’ve always tried not to be, until now.

“Of course you’re not,” she places her hand on my clenched fist. “I’m sorry I asked.” She laughs gently, nervously, without humor. “It’s just things don’t seem good right now in Ezra’s world.”

“It’s really not my business,” I implore, needing this conversation to be over and fast. I’m about to have a panic attack.

“You’re still at Laurie’s?”

I nod and scowl, grateful for the conversation switch. “The police can’t do anything about how Pax is behaving. Every time I think he’s backing off he does something else. Laurie posted on Saturday night that we were out drinking at our favorite hotspot and he showed up. Tried dancing with me. Kept telling me how sorry he was, and then threw his drink at the wall when I told him to leave me alone.”

“Oh my God…” She blinks slowly. “You’re kidding?”

“I wish I were. He then sent flowers to my house on that Sunday, my neighbor called to let me know.”

“You must be terrified constantly.”

“It’s why I was so hesitant to come here. The last thing I want is to put anybody I care about in harm’s way. The policeman was kind and issued me with a police-grade Taser, so even they think he’s dangerous, but they can’t do anything until he either gets caught damaging my property or assaults me.”

“That’s crazy.”

“*He’s* crazy. And I’m tired of this innocent-until-proven-guilty thing. They’re probably going to charge him with harassment, but even then, it’s just a restraining order through the courts which can take a bit of time. It’s like I have to wait for him to kill me before anything can be done.”

“We should see about getting you some protection. Mario would be happy to take you to a gun range, teach you how to shoot? Get you a license to carry?”

I have been considering it, especially since Saturday night. “I might take him up on that offer.”

“You should. No woman should ever be made to feel too frightened to live in her own home.”

I completely agree, it’s so unfair. “Thank you, Izabella. For everything.” I sigh heavily. “I gave up my home this morning. I gave them my one-month notice.”

“Have you found a place?”

I shake my head. “No, but I might have found a new job.”

“Oh, wow!” she beams at me, unable to hide her relief. If I didn’t know that she knows about Ezra’s feelings for me, I never would have spotted it. “Where?”

“Seattle, Robert Butler put out a word and one of his friends has a space opening up in a few weeks.”

Her face falls. “That’s so far away.”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe distance is what you need right now?”

I nod slowly. “*Exactly.*”

“Ezra is going to struggle to replace you.”

“I’ll find him somebody amazing before I go.”

“*If* you go.”

Truth be told I’ve been putting some real thought into it. My feelings for Ezra are getting stronger than ever and I just know if we don’t end it soon, it’s going to blow up in everybody’s faces and hurt so many people.

“You’ve already decided,” Izabella murmurs.

I smile at her, my eyes wet. “It’s for the best. He’s not going to follow me to Seattle.”

At this point I’m not sure if I’m talking about Pax or Ezra.

She links her arm through mine and we press our shoulders together. “You’re going to be amazing, no matter where you go.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Eight

He gives me butterflies in my stomach.

My arms are still aching from my first ever shooting range practice with Mario. It's safe to say my aim is terrible but it did improve by the end of the day.

To say shooting guns gives you a massive rush is an understatement. I'm thrumming with the adrenaline I got from it. I love this feeling.

I've never felt so in control of myself, so exhilarated. I got nervous after the first loud bang and dropped to my knees, covering my ear guards with my hands. But Mario coaxed me out of it and I eventually got used to the noise. It was a gut reaction that we both ended up laughing about, but it made me feel like such a freak. Though if Mario thought so he never showed it.

He also let me count twelve seconds between each shot without getting frustrated.

"Well hello, I wasn't expecting to see you today," Ezra says while grinning when I enter his office and click the lock.

"You have half an hour," I tell him as I move to his chair, still buzzing with excitement.

"I do?"

"You do," I whisper, turning his seat and standing between his knees.

His eyes look me up and down when I slowly start to pull up my skirt, showing him the tops of my stockings, and my lack of panties.

I kick off my heels and slide one foot and leg through the arm of his leather, spinning chair, and then maneuver the other one through as he unbuckles his belt and pulls his hard cock free. I love that I can do that for him just by entering the room. We can never get enough of each other.

He lifts my white, low V-cut top up and over my red-lace-clad breasts.

"I hope you didn't wear this to go shooting with my dad, you'll have given the poor man a heart attack."

“Let’s not talk about your dad when I’m about to fuck you into oblivion.” I reach for the handle under the seat, pull it and it drops three inches, so my feet are on the floor as I straddle him.

I kiss him deep and slow as I raise my hips and guide his cock to my entrance.

“To oblivion, hmm?” he asks, smiling until I slowly sink onto him, taking as much of him as I can. His smile vanishes at this point only to be replaced with such an intense look of complete wonder and awe. “Nobody has ever felt like you.”

I rock my hips, kissing his neck and biting his ear as his hands explore and rub every inch of my body that he can reach.

I don’t take my time because we don’t have time. I fuck him faster than I ever have, feeling it build in my womb.

We come, me first and then him, as always. He always waits until I’m done before he lets himself get there. One of the many things I adore about him.

I look at him after crying out my number and then his and kiss his lips gently.

“Every day I try to find excuses to come and see you,” I whisper, kissing his jaw as he still pulses inside of me and I throb around him. He starts to soften, the weirdest feeling. “Every night it’s torture.”

“You love me,” he murmurs, grinning like the happiest man in the world. “Just say it.”

“I can’t. I won’t.”

“Why?”

“Because when I say it, it means I feel it, and if I feel it, who will be strong enough to walk away?”

He taps the end of my nose with his tongue. “Then don’t walk away.”

I stand and climb from him, using every Kegel muscle I have, to stop leaking his seed everywhere. I enter the bathroom and we start our ritual of cleaning ourselves up, side by side, no embarrassment, just tender looks and touches.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” he asks, looking wary when I don’t hold his eyes for more than a few seconds following that conversation.

“I’m going to Seattle this weekend,” I state, pulling on my top and checking my hair in the mirror.

“What? Why?”

While clicking my fingers, I slip my shoes back on, smiling when he crouches down to help me wriggle my feet in. He kisses my thigh, stands, and wraps his arms around mine, stopping me from acting out my little quirks. “You’re nervous. What’s in Seattle?”

“A job interview,” I answer, and he freezes, his eyes, his body, his

lips, everything falls and then freezes.

"Why do you need a job interview in Seattle?"

I try to pull away, but he holds me tighter. "I gave up my apartment yesterday morning."

"So, get a new one. I'll help you. I know the owners of some of the best apartment complexes in the city."

"Ezra—"

"Don't quit, you promised me you wouldn't."

I look into his eyes. "I promised no such thing. It's for the best."

"Says who?"

"Says me, says your mom, says Pax."

He shakes his head, looking desperate and panicked. "I can protect you from Pax. I'll hire you a detail to take care of you."

"And what about you? Can you protect me from the fallout that will happen when we get caught?" I turn his head back towards me. "This isn't a matter of *if*, but a matter of *when*."

"So, you flee to Seattle?"

"One of us has to make the hard decision."

"Why?"

"Because I'm nobody's second, Ezra, that's why!" I snap, successfully pulling away from him now. "Because of the thing I won't say aloud… I'm too consumed by you, too desperate to be with you and you don't belong to me. You're asking me to be your second. That's not something I ever want for myself."

He looks as devastated as I feel. "I don't want that for you either. I don't know what to do. I just know that I can't let you go. You can stay my PA. Nobody would have to know about us. We could be discreet."

I close my eyes and wrap my arms around myself. "You're married."

"You don't think I know that?"

"Doesn't the guilt consume you? Because it is consuming me. It's devouring me. I can hardly sleep at night worrying if you feel guilt so strong that it has you confessing to your wife about me as you lie in *her* bed." Before he can reply I inhale a staggered breath. "You're asking me to be your other woman. You're asking me to put my life on hold for a man who will never be mine. You're exploiting my feelings for you."

"That's not what I'm trying to do. I just… I just know that I love you and I want you."

"You're married!" I turn on him, slamming my hands against his bare chest. "You already promised your soul to her. Your wife."

"And I love my wife," he hisses, looking conflicted and hurt. "I love her, and I don't want to hurt her. I can't even say that my

marriage is unhappy because it's not. We were so fucking happy when this began."

I want to run away. I don't want to hear this.

"I love my wife…"

"Stop."

"But I'm *in love* with you. It feels unfair. It feels so fucking unfair that I don't get to have you and I know it's greedy. I'm asking you for too much. But I can't bear to lose you. I want *you*."

I kiss him desperately, needing to confirm his words with a taste of him. Then I break away just as suddenly. "I can't handle the thought of you going home to your wife every night and fucking her when hours before you had me. I don't want to share."

"Then there's no other option. I'll divorce her."

"No." I panic, thinking of his daughter and the damage that will cause. "No, you can't do that… not for me… not for anyone. Maria, she's at such an impressionable age. It would ruin her. Especially since you're happy. She'll be so confused. She'll lose you, her mom, and me. Besides, we both know that's not something you want."

He doesn't deny the latter which breaks me even more. He's just saying empty things to get me to stay. "Then let's pretend… let's just keep going as we are, pretending there is no wife. It's just you and me. We'll go on trips away from here, places where we don't have to hide."

"I can't do that either."

He pushes his hands through his hair. "You're ending us."

"There's nothing to end, Ezra. I'm not yours. You're not mine. And I need to get out of here before it becomes impossible to leave."

"I can't lose you."

"Let's just enjoy what little time we have left together, okay?"

He nods, lifting me and turning until I'm sitting on the desk. "Maybe I can win you over."

"I doubt it. There are things I want from my future that I can't get from you, Ezra. I want a family of my own, I've never had one. I want to get married and brag to everyone how gorgeous my husband is. I want to live with somebody and get annoyed that they leave their socks by the hamper. I want normal. I don't want to live in fear. I definitely don't want to live in another woman's shadow."

He doesn't argue further because he knows I'm right. Instead he kisses me like it's the last time, pulls my hips to the edge of the desk and fucks me like he did the first time.

For the most part, things get back to normal and we jump on a plane

to Reno for two nights to oversee a sale take place. It's so mundane. The only saving grace is the fact I'm alone with Ezra.

We still booked two hotel rooms but obviously we're sharing his.

Our first time in a bed was… I'll never recover. I don't like to think about it because of how sweet it was and how attentive he was, and the way we lay together afterwards for hours just talking and playfighting and teasing each other endlessly.

It'll be one of those memories that I'll cherish forever.

I know he feels the same.

Our final night we go for dinner and then dancing, then go back to the hotel for more of the same. There's just nothing boring or undesirable about this man. Every single time I try to find something about him that I might not like, I end up liking him more.

"Don't go to Seattle," he begs on a whisper as I lie curled around his body, my head under his chin. "Please. Let me figure it out. We've had no time together at all."

"There's nothing to figure out," I whisper back, circling his nipple with the tip of my finger. Little does he know I'm counting the circles and I'm on circle eighteen. Anything to distract myself from this unpleasant conversation. He often stops my nervous tics when he knows they're happening and for the most part my tics around him are at the lowest they've been in a long time, but that doesn't mean they're gone forever. "Your place is with your wife. You can't have us both. One of us is bound to get hurt. I don't want that mess for you, Elizabeth, or Maria."

"You're so much stronger than I am. I'm a coward."

"No, you're just… conflicted. I get it. That's why I'm making the decision for you."

"Le parole non possono descrivere il mio amore per te."

"What did you say?"

He kisses my temple. "Words cannot describe my love for you."

I smile and close my eyes, stopping the circling at thirty-six. "Tell me a story in Italian. I love to hear you speak it."

"Qualsiasi cosa a tu desideria." He proceeds to talk, and I listen until I physically can't stay awake any longer.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Nine

He takes care of me.

I exit the plane after a two-hour flight and stretch as I wait for my suitcase. Beyond the gate where I'm supposed to be greeted, I'm surprised to find Robert waiting for me with a sign that reads:

"Best one-nighter ever"

I laugh as I approach the executive recruiter for WhyTech and close friend of Ezra's. He looks great in dark jeans and a light pink button up.

"Is that sign for me?"

"No, it's just a coincidence that we're both here at the same time," he jests, looking over my head for somebody else.

I smack his arm and squeak when he hugs me, lifting me off the floor.

"You smell so good," he tells me, nuzzling my neck.

"Would you stop?" I admonish but I'm still grinning.

He puts me down and wags his brows at me. "Happy to see me?"

"Not as happy as you are to see me it seems," I joke, taking the sign from him and hitting him in the groin with it. He feigns injury and links an arm around my neck. I tense at the contact but don't push him away. "Why are you here?"

"I'm recruiting you, showing you all the reasons why you should come to Seattle and take the job."

"I thought this was an interview?"

"It was… until you got three different offers of employment from three different CEOs and executives looking for office managers."

"Umm… what?"

He rolls his shoulders. "You're good at what you do, I pimped you out, they all want *you,* baby. But Mr. Watanabe is desperate for an excellent PA and office manager, his firm is wealthy, and he wants you more than the rest because he asked me to convince you as a

personal favor."

I blink at him. "He asked *you*?"

"Yep, because recruiting is what I do and I'm the one who recommended you to begin with." He squeezes my shoulder and grabs my suitcase with his other hand. "Also, I live here, so I know Seattle and all the best places to go."

"I've never done office management before."

"That's essentially what you did for Conti," he points out. "You took over that entire floor and we all know it. That's why people stopped going to him and started coming to you. He had more time to do his actual job because of you."

"Aww." I pat his chest. "Such a shining review."

"You can give me the ten bucks for that later. Now come on. Let me help you fall in love with this incredible city and show you your apartment."

"My apartment?"

"I have one on hold for you if you say yes." He gives me a squeeze. "I told you I'd sort you out."

"You certainly did."

His smiling hazel eyes hold mine for a beat before he releases me and motions for me to step on an escalator that takes us down a level.

We climb into a waiting car and I listen to him be his charming self as we drive to Robert's apartment, a condo on the middle floor of a towering high-rise.

"No hotel?" I jest, not actually all that bothered about where I stay, it's just nice to feel safe for the first time in weeks.

He wags his brows at me and holds my shoulders, taking me to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a balcony and Seattle itself.

"Oh God… you have a hot tub. What the frick?" I laugh because I'm not surprised. "This place is as bachelor pad as it gets."

"Right?"

He calls for me when he crosses the open space, passing a large L-shaped black leather couch. I follow him to what looks to be my room and sit on the comfy bed.

"It's new bedding, never been slept in, washed thoroughly. I know how your quirky little brain works."

I flop back and he flops next to me.

"Selfie," he announces, his tone high and dramatic. When he raises his phone, I smile like a normal person and laugh when he takes two more.

"What are you… Kim K?"

"Duh. Look at my ass." He gets up and shakes it a little. It's a nice ass. "Hurry up, settle in, I've got to take you out again."

"Okie dokie." I relax for ten minutes before I check my phone for

the first time since landing after sending texts to announce my safe arrival.

Laurie: Woohoo! Enjoy :D

Ezra: Wish I could be there. Call me when you can.
Ezra: Are you with Robert? He just posted a picture on Insta.

Laurie: I hope you hate Seattle and decide to stay, just so you know.

I respond to Laurie first.

Rose: Miss you. <3 Wish you were here.

Then Ezra.

Rose: He picked me up from the airport. He lives here… or had you forgotten?

Ezra: I know where he lives, I just didn't realize you were both so close.

Rose: We're kind of friends, I guess. What's the big deal?

Ezra: He's single.

Rose: You're jealous.

Ezra: Just worried.

Rose: About what?

Ezra: That I'll get an invitation to your wedding in a year.

Rose: That's crazy. I hardly know him.

Ezra: He's a good-looking, single guy, ready to settle down, he's not a psychopath and he treats his woman well when he has one. What more do you need to know?

Rose: Are you pitching your friend to me?!?!?!

Ezra: Just praying you don't end up liking him more than me while pointing out all the reasons you should. Does that make me selfish?

Rose: No. Just jealous.

Rose: I'm not going to sleep with Robert. Don't worry.

Ezra: I don't have any right to tell you not to. Yet I find myself wanting to claim you. Still think I'm not selfish?

Rose: I think this is a very confusing thing with a lot of bent and broken rules. You can't help how you feel. I'll call you when I'm back.

Ezra: Why not before? I miss the sound of your voice.

Rose: Because I need to know what life will be like here without you.

Ezra: You love me.

Rose: I love myself more.

Ezra: Good girl.

"Ready?" Robert asks, smiling at me and I nod my head eagerly. "Let's go, my fair lady."

I take his proffered arm when I exit the bedroom and comment on how nice he smells.

He just does that casual wag of his brows, ruining the moment.

"I'm never complimenting you again."

We hit the city and he's right, it is amazing. We head for dinner at a sushi bar, and then go for drinks at his favorite dive that plays really good live music. His friends are there and make me feel so at home and welcome, which is amazing and really makes me think about what Ezra said via text about Robert being a better choice.

Not Robert in particular but just this. This is what my boyfriend should be able to do. He should be able to introduce me to his friends and take me on a tour of his home. I should be able to stay at his place at the end of the night.

I'm not saying I need a boyfriend; it just sucks that I've fallen in

love with one that I'll never have. It's so unfair. I want a family of my own because I'm sick of being lonely, and the first guy to like my quirks is a sociopath, and the second one is married.

You can't make this stuff up.

I kind of want to laugh at the hilarity of it, except it's not funny, just depressing.

The next day I have my interview, meeting my potential new boss who is absolutely adorable and so sweet, and I leave crying because if I want it, the job is mine.

I think this was mostly because I saw the staff list lined with their photos and remembered everything about them after one look at the sheet. My memory is a powerful thing.

Robert: He's singing your praises.

I'm happy, of course I'm happy, but I'm also devastated because of what Mr. Watanabe said to me, that he had received a glowing reference from Mr. Conti saying how I'm the best PA he has ever had and likely ever will have.

He made his choice too. We both know this is for the best.

And Robert really has shown me what Seattle could be for me, and my new apartment, though he offered to share his bed with me at his. Of course he did.

We parted on a tight embrace, I felt sad leaving him, not because I want him romantically but because we bonded over two days and I feel like I actually made another friend. My tapping doesn't annoy him in the slightest either.

When I touch back down in LAX and locate my bag, I go to buy a coffee from a machine because I don't want to wait in the lines, when a chest hits my back, a face hits my hair, and arms squeeze me so forcefully I can't breathe.

I look down and smile when I see the familiar watch on his wrist.

"What are you doing?" I hiss, stroking his arm with my hand. "This is LAX, any number of yours or your wife's associates could be here."

"I don't care," he breathes, turning me and touching his lips to mine. I glance around, pulling him around the side of the coffee machine for at least some semblance of privacy.

I sag into his body, clinging tight as our tongues dance together, but then I remember all the reasons why this is a bad idea and push him away.

"We can't." I keep my hand on his chest, giggling when he brings it to his lips, gray eyes shining with so much love and passion.

"No, we can't… not yet… but in a few months when everything

has calmed down, then we can."

My heart is hammering, something doesn't feel right about this. "What are you talking about?"

"I told Elizabeth that I want a divorce."

"WHAT?" I shriek, feeling faint and nauseous. "When? Why?"

"After our texts, because I love you and I don't want to miss my chance with you." He pushes my hair back behind my ear.

I shake him off and brush past him, letting him grab my suitcase. "I can't do this."

"Don't say that."

"Somebody has to!" I look at him and then around, keeping my voice low just in case somebody we know is listening. That would be our luck. "You're married. You promised your soul to another woman. You can't just yank that back and give it to me."

"Why not?"

"Because then how will I ever know that what we have is real? You will what? Divorce her and marry me someday? And then what? I'll sit at home wondering every single night which receptionist you're gonna fall for to replace me." I stop and turn to face him. "You can't leave your wife for me; you'll end up resenting me if we don't work out. Leave your wife because it's what you actually want."

"It is what I want…"

"Would you be divorcing her if you didn't have me on the bench?"

He bites his lip. "I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy about what? That I'm stealing another woman's man?"

"That's not—" He blows out a breath, looking conflicted again. "Come on, I want to show you something and I want to hear all about Seattle on the way."

We change the subject and I tell him all about Robert and his friends, and how we stayed up until four singing karaoke and we both butchered "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" together which was hilarious.

He listens with a smile on his face as he drives us through LA to location unknown. We head towards the ocean, to Santa Monica, only around a forty-minute drive to the office.

"Where are we going?" I ask, peering out of the window at the bright lights of the pier, trying not to think about the conversation that is to come.

"You will see," he replies, grinning with excitement.

Less than ten minutes later we're parked in the private underground parking of a tall, white high-rise. I still don't know what we're doing here.

He tells me to wait so he can open my door and he holds my hand as we make our way through the busy lot and to the elevator. He

scans something on his keys, a round disk of sorts, using a light below the elevator button. The button lights up red until he presses it and it turns white.

"Seriously… what are we doing here?" I whisper, feeling the need to be quiet because of the lack of people.

The elevator is modern, with clean mirrors and a row of numbers, some with names next to them such as "fitness center" and "pool terrace."

"Is this a hotel?" I ask, even more confused.

He presses button thirteen and then cages me in to the wall, holding the silver bar with both hands, kissing my neck and my lips, making any questions I had fly from my mind. I hum and turn my head, giving him more access to the parts of me that make me shiver when touched.

He grinds against me, showing me his arousal, and making mine ten times worse.

We don't stop until the doors ping open onto a spacious floor. It's shaped like a hexagon with tall sweet-smelling flowers in huge twisted black vases to my left and right, and doors that have the numbers 13A and 13B on them.

He spins the keys around his finger, holding my hand and leading me to 13A.

This place is so fancy.

"What's going on?" I ask when he presses the same round disk to the underneath of the door handle, and it turns the lock green.

He yanks down the handle and pushes it open. It smells so new and fresh, and clean.

When we step inside, he commands, "MURPHY. AUTO LIGHTS ON."

We step into a nicely lit hall, white walls, wood floors, beautiful detail on the ceiling. The lights are like a snake of tiny white orbs leading further into the apartment.

"Here." He drops my suitcase as the door closes behind us and guides me forward a few steps only to push open a door. "Our bedroom."

"Our bedroom?" I question, stepping inside and assessing the amazing room, complete with bed, nightstands, massive windows overlooking the city, blinds that seem to be electrically powered. "What do you mean *our* bedroom?"

He pulls open the closet doors, showing a walk-in closet with both a his and hers side, complete with clothing. Mine from my house, his from his. Oh my God.

"This… how is this happening?"

"Come on," he states, kissing me and leading me around the rest of

the apartment. It has a modern kitchen with an island, and a balcony overlooking the ocean, and a guest bedroom, a living space, a den where his laptop is already set up and so is mine on a second desk beside it.

"How is this happening?" I'm so confused and spaced. "This is crazy."

"This was originally going to be a gift for my sister, but Steven has since decided they want to live elsewhere. When I told my wife that I wanted a divorce, it just clicked that I could still go ahead with the purchasing of this place, and we could make it our own."

I'm bewildered. Absolutely bewildered. "You're telling me you want to live together?"

"It's soon, but you need a place to live, I need a place to live…"

"This is crazy, you know that, right?" I whisper, moving to my suitcase and picking it up. I don't know why. I don't know if I'm staying or going. I want to pace and consider all this but he won't let me.

"It's safe here, they have their own security, the entire building is locked down tight. You can't get up to a floor without the right key. You can't get into the parking lot without a key either."

"That's all well and good, but how would we explain this to anybody?"

"We won't, not yet. As far as Elizabeth is concerned, I'll be staying with my parents or in hotels, and that's where I'll have our daughter."

I drop my case and bite my lip. "I don't know what to make of this."

"Stay here, stay with me, don't go to Seattle. Be mine."

"You're insane."

"I am. You make me insane. I want you to myself all day, every day." He pulls me into his body and kisses me softly, but I'm so tense I can hardly reciprocate.

"How did you make this happen in less than two days?"

"The apartment was already furnished, all I did was add the second desk and pick up your clothes and fast-track the sale with a bit of extra cash," he explains, flashing his eyes at me. "I'm serious about us. I'm never happier than when I'm with you."

"You promised yourself to another woman. What about her?"

His smile fades and his eyes cloud with sadness. "At the end of the day, my wife deserves better from me. I've been cheating on her physically and emotionally." He backs into the wall opposite me and we both stare at each other. "I'm not going to tell her about any of that because I don't want to cause her pain, but I am going to leave her and give her the chance to find the happiness she deserves. Hopefully the same kind of happiness I have found with you."

“How can you be so sure about me? What if we don’t work out?”

“Then I still cheated on my wife and she still deserves better, and I’ll just sit and drink whiskey every night while listening to Celine Dion remind me how much I miss you.”

I laugh and look back towards the apartment again, and then towards the door. My fingers and thumb start to twitch. I want my stress ball. “We should have discussed this. What if I want to go to Seattle?”

“Then I’m still leaving my wife and I still need a place of my own.”

I inhale and then exhale. “You promise me that you’re not leaving her because of me? That’s just… it’s too much for my shoulders.”

“I promise. I’m leaving her because of me. I’ll never blame you for that.”

“Maria…”

“Is a strong, intelligent little lady who will adjust and will one day understand.”

Tears fill my eyes, I don’t know why, this just feels like a really sad and emotional moment.

He cups my face with his hands and wipes away my tears with his thumbs. “Why don’t I run you a bath, pour you a glass of wine, order dinner from the restaurant upstairs and then make love to you in *our* bed?”

“Okay,” I whisper, accepting another kiss. “That sounds good.”

Smiling brightly, he claims my mouth and devours me against the wall, deepening it only when I wrap my arms around his neck.

“Now you can say it,” he breathes, pressing his forehead to mine. “Now it’s safe for you to say it because I’m yours.”

I pull away from him, pretending to not see the hurt that flashes in his eyes. “I’ll unpack.”

“I’ll run that bath.” He stops in the doorway when I lift my suitcase onto the bed. “I love you. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“I know you do,” I reply sadly. “But I just… I need time to wrap my head around all of this. It’s moving so fast…”

“I understand.” He winks at me and vanishes through a door on the far left, leaving me to click my fingers and count to thirty-six before I can breathe again. I should be elated that a man wants me this much, but I guess I just wasn’t expecting it. It’s a lot to take in. Perhaps too much.

I always had this idea that he’d leave me one day. Not his wife. Not for me.

I hear the bath water start to hiss against the bath and focus on the sound to calm myself.

When he returns and finds me sitting on the bed he crouches before me and places his hands on my knees. “Do you want to talk

about it?"

"Not really."

"Did I upset you?"

I don't want him thinking that I'm ungrateful or unhappy with what he's done here, so the least I owe him is an insight into how I'm feeling.

"It's the sneaking," I mutter and grasp his hands as he lands on one knee and stretches so we're closer to eye level. "I don't like the sneaking and lying. There's still the chance we'll get caught and she'll get hurt."

"But… I'm single, you're not fooling around with a man who is going home to another woman every night."

"You're not though, that's the thing about marriage. You'll never really be single until she's moved on. There's always the fear you'll go back to her."

"I'm not going back to her. Even if you leave me."

"But what if she finds out about you having an affair and she wants to try again? Elizabeth doesn't strike me as the type to just lose her husband to another woman. You love her too; you've loved her for longer." I imagine them smiling and feeling giddy and afraid as they took their vows. It breaks me in half. "I don't think I'm strong enough to be—"

"I wouldn't be here all the time. This would be more your place than mine. I have to stay at my parents' and have Maria there… but eventually, in a few months when the divorce is final and things have settled, we can start dating in public. Okay? What's a few months really?"

I look around this amazing bedroom and look at this amazing man who steals my breath with just a glance. But then I think back to Seattle and how nice and chilled my life could be there with my killer apartment, new job, and no man troubles to worry about.

I don't want this ache in my chest. I don't want this fear of being caught.

I love Ezra, I know that I do, but is he worth all the drama that his decision will bring?

"How did she take it?"

He presses his forehead to my throat, and I run my fingers through his hair. "She was confused, angry… she thinks it's because she doesn't want more kids but that's not it. She doesn't understand what changed."

"She's going to jump to the conclusion of you having an affair soon and she's going to start digging."

He nods and stands, pulling me with him. "I can handle it. You don't have to worry about any of that. Okay?"

I raise my arms as he lifts my T-shirt from my body, and then giggle a little when he pushes down my jeans and kisses my stomach.

"Let's just focus on being happy," he breathes against my lips. "As best we can, considering the circumstances."

"Okay. I'll consider it. But I need time to think."

"Was what they offered you in Seattle *that* good?"

I nod sadly. "The money, the apartment, the fact I already have friends over there."

"You mean Robert?"

I nod again, trying to stifle my smile as I walk into the bathroom in nothing but my bra and panties. When I turn, I'm disappointed to see him still fully clothed. "You're not getting in with me?"

"I'm going to order food, give you space to clear your head, then we'll discuss Robert."

I kind of like him jealous. He's not like Pax, he's just a bit broody and aggravated but not with me. He still smiles at me and doesn't give me that bad jealous vibe.

"We can wait to eat." I bend and turn off the faucet. "Join me."

I yank at his T-shirt as my lips move against his. My fingers work at the buttons until they can push it down his arms without obstruction.

He groans when I rub his chest and shoulders and I feel the tension in his muscles. He's stressed out to the max.

"I think you need this bath more than me," I comment, waiting while he unclips my bra.

When I'm nude, I sink into the hot, soapy water and wait for him to do the same. He rests back against my chest and I rub his neck, his head, his shoulders, his arms. He moans and groans and eventually I see his second brain poke its head out of the water.

Laughing, I wrap my leg around his waist and try to push it down with my foot.

He turns suddenly, sending water crashing over the bath and onto the tiles. His damp lips from the steam of the hot water touch mine and I almost slip under when he hooks a hand around my back and lifts me to give him easier access to my sex.

I gasp when he thrusts inside. My hands grip whatever is available to keep me out of the water. He pulls out just as suddenly so I can turn over and I rest my arms on the sloped back of the bath as he powers into me from behind. Every thrust sends more water out of the bath. He becomes feral, losing control in a way he never has before, driving into me like an animal and not like a man.

I gasp and moan, shifting to get the best angle. He lets me play with myself this time, normally he doesn't but I think he's so desperate to take his mind off everything that he doesn't care how I

come, so long as I do.

His fingers dig into my hips, his cock hits the back of my sex, his thighs slap against my ass and there's only half a bath full of water left.

The feeling builds and burns, I keep playing with myself as he keeps driving into me and I spiral, biting my arm to stop me from being too loud but then he doesn't care. He roars his release, saying my name and holding my hips to his as he swells and pulses inside of me.

"Seven hundred and nineteen."

"Is that it?" he asks, smiling and panting. "Give me three hundred and we'll go again."

Laughing, I roll back over, and we resume the position we were in before, except now there's no water left.

"So… you and Robert," he grumbles, "you hit it off?"

"Yep. He's so much fun."

"Mm-hmm, I bet he is."

I laugh and twist his nipple. "Quiet."

He yelps and falls silent for a while, but I just know he's still thinking. "How much fun?"

"A lot."

He falls silent again and we finish bathing, washing quickly before he climbs out of it and holds a fluffy white towel open for me, after promising me they're brand new and have been washed. I snuggle his damp body and hum as he keeps me warm with both fabric and arms.

Then with a gentle kiss on my forehead, he exits, leaving me to dry myself. He chooses me an outfit to wear to the restaurant which is on the highest floor, and I quickly don the jeans and shirt, wondering how he gained access to my apartment to collect my things to begin with.

He most likely paid somebody.

Money makes the world turn, that's for sure.

It's as I'm pulling on my sneakers and tying them that he finally asks, "What exactly is, *a lot*?"

"Huh?" I'm confused by the random question. I knew he had something on his mind, I just didn't know exactly what.

"You said Robert was a lot of fun. What exactly is a lot?"

It sinks in what he's talking about with his guarded tone and his eyes unable to meet my face.

"Are you asking me if I slept with him?" Is it wrong that I'm offended by the question? Not so much that I want to fight about it, but enough that I'm feeling a bit annoyed. Especially since I told him I wouldn't.

"Forget it," he replies, smiling and looking at me now. "I shouldn't

have— let's just eat, okay?"

"What would you do if I did?" I pry, because I'm feeling a little more confrontational than usual. Probably because I'm tired and a little bit hungover and I've got a seriously difficult decision to make.

He freezes, his smile fading. "Nothing. We weren't exclusive. I can't ask for monogamy when I've not granted it myself."

Knowing that he's been bedding his wife and having it verbally confirmed are two entirely different things. I feel sick.

"But it's different now. We can start afresh, me and you, this apartment, working together."

I drag my teeth over my lower lip.

He hooks his arms around my waist. "It's going to be amazing."

So why do I feel sick to the bottom of my stomach?

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty

How well he comforts me.

I told Laurie about the apartment, but not about Ezra. I just guess I'm not ready to admit out loud what I've done yet. She joined me the other night, balking over the décor and the view, and the rooftop pool… yep, there's a rooftop pool. I could get used to living like this.

So why am I still so conflicted?

Laurie loves the apartment and hasn't asked why work is paying for such an expensive place for just a PA. Truth be told, I think she might know about me and Ezra but she's just too scared to ask. Just like I'm too scared to tell.

The clues are there for her to see. The fact I have a new car now, a matte black Mercedes sporty thing, suitable for two. Another gift from Ezra. Well, temporary gift. It's his second car and he's not using it so he's allowing me to. Since we keep it secure at the underground garage at home and the lot at work. I don't go anywhere alone in between for it to be vandalized, but he said when he's sure this Pax situation is over, he's going to get me a car.

I don't need or want his money, I have my own, but if he wants to buy me a car, I'm not going to say no. Still…

I've been here for a week now, three of those days and nights Ezra has been at his parents' with Maria, giving me space and clarity I haven't asked for but have needed.

One thing is for sure, when he's not here I miss him more than I've ever missed anyone, I never thought I'd feel like that about another person. Another thing is for sure, we're in the honeymoon stages of our relationship and I don't trust it. We get along great and have so much fun together, but I know it won't last. The honeymoon period I mean. I guess it's messed up because I'm trying to decide if a few months of bliss is worth the heartache everyone will feel because of our actions.

I'm also terrified his wife will convince him to go back. It's an overwhelming feeling of panic and loss every time I consider it a possibility.

I love him. I love everything about him. The way he smiles, the way he kisses me when he thinks I'm sleeping, how he holds my hand while we're watching the flat screen, or he plays with my hair while I work on my laptop on the sofa.

He's attentive in so many ways and for the most part he's what I would call the perfect man. I feel blessed and lucky to have him. But I'm not naïve enough to think it will last any more than I'm naïve enough to think Pax has suddenly turned over a new leaf.

Pax who has stayed away from me at work, hasn't texted or called, hasn't vandalized my belongings anymore. I feel like he's just a pot waiting to boil and I'm about to be scalded.

I feel it brewing, or perhaps I'm paranoid because of everything going on.

At work I'm jumpy, I will hardly let Ezra touch me beyond a few secret kisses and gropes, though he just thinks I'm adorable.

I'm too anxious, even though my twitches are at their lowest, the urge to do them is higher than it ever has been. I don't know if that's because I'm focusing so hard on not freaking out or not. I'm not cut out for this life of suspense.

Speaking of suspense, I jump when the front door opens and closes. I wasn't expecting him back tonight, it's late, almost eleven.

"Hey." He walks in looking disheveled with a nasty-looking scratch down his neck. His hair is a mess and his eyes are tense. "I thought you'd be sleeping."

"What happened?" I ask, blinking and standing on my knees on the wide, flat-cushioned sofa.

He sits next to me and lets his head hang over the back of it.

I take his hand in mine and tickle his palm. He loves it when I do that, another discovery I made about him this week.

"Hey, what happened?"

"Elizabeth," he responds sighing heavily and rubbing his face with his hands.

"She attacked you?"

He looks at me, letting his arms drop to his sides. "She was upset when I wouldn't reciprocate her advances. She's finally started to question if I'm…"

When his voice trails off, I pick up after him. "Having an affair?" He nods slowly. "What did you say?"

"I told her that I didn't leave her for anybody, that I'm just done."

"The truth within a lie," I murmur, standing and racing to the bathroom where there's a medicine cabinet. I grab the antiseptic and a cotton ball after washing my hands. He cringes when I return to him with both. "Did she believe you?"

"No. She's so hurt and it's killing me." He hisses when I dab the

antiseptic onto his broken skin. “I don’t want to hurt her.”

“Of course you don’t.” I feel devastated for her, I can only imagine how she’s feeling, though putting her hands on him wasn’t okay.

“I filed for divorce and she got served the papers. I’ve never seen her looking so… I shouldn’t be talking about this with you.”

“Who else can you talk about it to?”

My phone beeps between us and Robert’s name flashes on the screen. Our eyes zero in on it. When he reaches for it with a smile on his face, I snatch it back. I don’t know why I reacted so quickly but the way I did was extremely suspicious. Even I know that.

We stare at each other and I don’t know what to say to defend myself. I’m not hiding anything per se, but Robert and I are still talking about me going to Seattle. I’ve got another week to decide and I’m still not sure what I want.

“I’m going to bed,” he mumbles after a minute of awkward silence.

I watch him walk away and wince when the bedroom door slams.

Robert: Halley said she’s been keeping in touch with you… what did I say about stealing my friends?

I laugh but I don’t reply, I’ll just let him assume I’ve fallen asleep.

I head to bed, feeling anxious. I don’t want Ezra to think the worst.

“I don’t know why I did that,” I say after peeling back the covers and climbing in. I already brushed my teeth and changed into my pajamas before he got here.

He doesn’t respond but I can tell he’s not sleeping; I know how he sounds and the way he’s breathing right now sounds tense and bitter.

“You’ve had a rough night, so how about I just do this until you’re ready to talk?” I wrap my arm around his back and kiss the back of his neck. “I didn’t sleep with Robert. I don’t want you to think I did.”

He doesn’t turn over and eventually he falls asleep for real.

In the morning I wake up and he’s not in bed beside me. I don’t immediately go looking for him, I shower and do my thing before exiting the bedroom fully dressed and ready for a long day at work. We’ve got so much to do today and I’m meeting with some potential replacements for Ezra if I decide to leave.

I have to let Robert know by the end of the week and then I have two more weeks to train somebody and break my heart, and Ezra’s.

“Morning,” I call cheerily as I turn the corner and enter the kitchen.

He grunts a reply but doesn’t look up from his newspaper. He’s still mad at me. Though I don’t know why. What I did wasn’t that bad. Was it?

I slice a red grapefruit into two pieces and dig into half with a spoon.

He texts on his phone.

This is awkward.

"I think this might be our first fight, is that normal this soon?" I ask when I finish my grapefruit and wipe my juicy lips on a napkin.

He grunts another response and I cross my eyes with frustration.

"Do you want me to suck your dick or something?" I ask, not in the mood for this and eager to do anything to get it to end. "Because I'm not about this. I put up with this from Pax and I'm not putting up with it from you. I said I didn't sleep with him."

He looks at me over the rim of his coffee cup before slamming his mug on the side. "I'm not fucking mad because I think you fucked him. I'm fucking mad because you're still thinking of going and I thought we were past that."

"Oh."

"Yes. *Oh.*" He pushes his hands through his hair. "I mean… what are we doing here? Why the fuck are we playing house if you're going to leave me in a few weeks anyway? Are you trying to torment me?"

"Torment you?" I gape at him. "*I'm* tormenting *you?* You mean while I go see my husband every night and keep you a dirty little secret? Or while I expect you to lie to everyone for me based on a love that happened so quickly, you're not sure you can trust it? Or while I expect you to trust me wholeheartedly with my soul when I cheated on my husband for you?"

"You want me to tell my family and wife what we've been doing? The only reason I'm lying is to protect us, to protect Maria, to protect Elizabeth."

"No, the only reason you're lying is because we did a bad fucking thing and now we have to."

"What do you want from me?" he asks, yelling now, "what do you want me to do? I'm sick and tired of you blaming your guilt solely on me. You fucked me too. I didn't rape you. I didn't make you do anything. You fucked me while I'm married, and you played just as big a part in this as either of us! You knew what you were getting into! You knew I loved you before we fucked! And now I'm trying to do right by you and everybody else and this is the shit I get at home." He shakes his head at me, his lips turned up with a sneer. "You are going behind my back. Letting me think we're okay when, really, you're leaving me. You are guilting me every second like I'm the only shit one here. We're both shit people. We both fucking did this. But go ahead, leave me to deal with it alone. Make me fall in love with you even more and then break my fucking heart because you're a coward that would rather run. It's the least I deserve, right?"

His words, true and clear, slice through my aching chest, spilling all my emotion out of me for him to see.

My eyes blur with tears. He's right about the guilt I feel, living another woman's life and hiding it from her too.

"You think I don't love you?"

"I don't know anymore. I thought you did but living with you this past week… you don't act like a girl in love."

"You mean like your wife did in the beginning?"

He throws his mug at the sink and it shatters in the basin making me gasp and step back. "You're a cruel woman, Rose. Fuck you."

The tears fall and I immediately hate myself for saying that.

He exits the kitchen, and I hear the rattle of his keys before the slamming of the front door. He's so mad and I really hurt him. I should never have said that to him. It was uncalled for.

I race after him, feeling my heart race and my anger fade.

I'm not even wearing my shoes yet.

"Wait!" I cry, pulling open the door and exiting the apartment. He's at the elevator pressing the button for it to come to our floor.

I fly at him, jumping on him so hard I worry we might both fall. I wrap my legs around his waist and kiss his lips, then his cheeks, his nose, his neck, all the while murmuring that I'm sorry, over and over again.

Midway through my apology his arms came around me and his forehead pressed against my neck.

"I love you," I say to him, leaning back so I can look into his eyes. Tears still swim in mine and his mirror my sorrow and shame. "I do. So much. I'm just… I'm scared. I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to get hurt. I don't want to ever see you hurt because of me. You're right, we did this together and we should stick together."

"You love me?"

"I do."

Our kiss deepens and he doesn't put me down. We go back into the apartment and kiss more on the bed. I love how strong he is, of course he can't carry me forever but sometimes he makes me feel like he can, the way he lifts me and throws me around during sex and in between. I love the attention.

I hum, keeping my legs wrapped around him as he grinds against me. Not intentionally, that's just how close we are.

"Don't go. Let me make you happy. It's just a few months of this hell and then everything will be perfect. You'll see." He shifts his weight so he's not crushing me. "Stay. *Please*."

"Okay."

He closes his eyes and then smiles with relief. "You'll stay?"

"Promise me you won't hurt me. Promise me."

“I promise,” he replies, holding my arms over my head. “I promise you the world.”

Smiling sweetly, I whimper when he kisses my neck, keeping my arms trapped above my head. “Then I promise you mine.”

It might be the worst decision I ever make, but one thing is for sure, I know I’ll never regret choosing him. I trust him. I have to.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-One

He's tenacious and proud.

Deciding to stay lifted a weight, well, once I broke the news to Rob it did, using the excuse that I just couldn't bring myself to leave Laurie and Izabella. Truth be told I've been avoiding Izabella since Ezra announced the divorce. I just have a feeling she's going to know that it's because of me.

I saw Maria on Tuesday though; I took her to soccer practice. Ezra wanted to come too but I said it's unfair on Elizabeth us playing happy family with her daughter while she's oblivious.

I think he misses her, not just Maria who seems great so far, thank heavens, but Elizabeth. He called me Liz a few days ago when he needed something while in the shower and I didn't get mad at him for it. You don't spend thirteen years with somebody to just suddenly forget about them.

So long as he doesn't call me her name while we're doing other things. Then I'll be mad.

But I see him look at his phone longingly sometimes and I wonder if he's wishing for her call. I wonder if in those moments he regrets his decisions. I hope not.

The past two weeks have flown by and to say I'm completely in love with this handsome and charming man is an understatement. He helped me clear out my apartment and most of my things went into storage. They just don't suit the modern look of my new place.

It was a fun but stressful day.

Pax has left me alone too. He doesn't even look at me as he passes anymore and I'm so grateful for that.

Ezra was right, everything would work out and so far, it has.

Except husband-stealing harlots like myself always have karma lurking around the corner and I'm just waiting for mine.

Robert: I'm on my way to LA. Are you going to come and meet me or what?

Rose: Hell yes, I am.

Robert: Fair warning, I've invited Cunty too, hope that's not weird.

Rose: Why would it be?

Robert: I wasn't sure what was going on with you both after what happened the last time the three of us got together. You haven't mentioned him beyond work shit.

Rose: We're cool. We figured it out. When and where am I meeting you?

"Will it be weird if we go together?" I ask, opening the door to Ezra's study. Although it's my study too I rarely use it. I prefer the sofa.

He looks up, wearing his new reading glasses that suit him so much. They were prescribed to him last week and let's just say I may or may not have made him wear them during sex once or ten times since.

Him in glasses, a tie, and nothing else… nom.

"Hungry?" he asks playfully after catching me look him up and down. I love that I can translate my desire for him with just a look. "And no, I don't think so. We'll get a car there and then I'll offer to give you a ride home."

"This is gonna be fun!" I cheer, bouncing over to him to kiss his head. "What are you doing in here anyway?"

"Boring stuff, it's much more interesting now that you're in here."

"Want a BJ?"

"Don't I always?"

I giggle and drop to my knees, smoothing his thighs with my hands.

I treat him as he works, though he doesn't get much done during.

Later we meet Robert who spins me around like a missed lover. I don't tell him not to despite Ezra bristling a bit in my peripheral. Robert is just playing, and Ezra knows better than to correct him. That would risk questions being asked, and I know that Robert knows about the kiss but I don't know if he knows about Ezra's feelings. Either way I don't need a third party to our affair because then I'll constantly be a paranoid mess. Ezra agrees.

"How are you? How have you been?"

"Fantastic, yet sad that I couldn't convince you to stay."

I pat his head. “Did Mr. Watanabe get a PA?”

“Not a good one. There’s still room for you to change your mind.”

“Not a chance,” Ezra responds, his tone dark, his eyes on his laughing friend. “Stop trying to poach my PA.”

“Mr. Watanabe was offering her a third over the salary she gets with you and an apartment, rent free. She must really like working with you if she chose you over that.”

“A third over?” Ezra baulks, looking at me for confirmation.

“Technically more if you count the rent I’d be saving,” I comment, grinning. “I must *love* working with you to decline that. And I was going to get the *head of office* title like I deserve.”

“Like you deserve,” he jests, digging me in the ribs with his fingers. “You’re such a little shit.”

Like the night we celebrated a massive deal that will change WhyTech forever, we head out but this time we eat first, stopping off at Robert’s favorite restaurant since he visits the city less.

We drink and get tipsy and Ezra gets handsy, he tries to be discreet, but I don’t think he has it in him while drunk. I’d love it if it weren’t for so many eyes. The world is such a small place.

I’m worried Robert will notice his affections, so I pull away from Ezra and call Laurie to see if she wants to meet us out. I bribe her with Ezra’s credit card and she accepts, always happy to get drunk on someone else’s dime.

When she gets here with Kyle, she’s the perfect buffer for our intimate little group and Robert loves her and her tics as much as the rest of us.

“COTTON CANDY GIN!” I’m not sure if that was a tic or if that’s the drink she wants. I take her with me to the bar anyway.

“Holy smokes.” She fans her face and not because it’s hot. “I’m trying to decide who’s better looking, the Italian god formally known as Ezra, or the American Hercules formally known as Robert. Why didn’t you know this many hot men when I was single?”

I look at Ezra and Robert who are laughing at something one of them has said. I don’t know how they can hear each other over the music if I’m being honest.

“Two cotton candy gins, please,” I call to the bar staff and they make it… it comes with a nest of melting cotton candy and everything.

“I think Robert is hot for you though, he keeps glancing over here. Isn’t that the guy you slept with in New York?”

“We just slept… nothing else,” I remind her, sipping my drink and cringing at how sweet it is. I slide it her way and grin when she cheers a loud, “YIPPEE!” Then I order a whiskey. I love whiskey.

“What are you two girls giggling about?” Ezra asks when we

approach them in the booth.

"What the hell is that?" Robert looks disgusted by the cotton candy gin drink and I can't say I blame him.

"Unicorn farts," I reply, and Laurie throws her head back with laughter.

I slide into the half-moon booth seat beside Robert and glance at Ezra who is looking at his phone, his lips a grim line.

"Hey, Mr. Antisocial," Laurie calls and Ezra looks up and grins, tucking his phone into his pocket.

Kyle joins us from wherever he went, and I bop to the music as Laurie yells at Ezra and Robert over me.

My eyes don't quite focus and I don't quite listen until I hear the words, "I do believe she used the term *American Hercules*."

Robert slings his arm around my shoulders. "Is that so?"

I shove him off me. "Your massive head is taking up all my space."

Chuckling, he falls into Ezra who is looking at his phone again. Maybe he didn't hear Laurie but then my phone vibrates in my bag that's pressed against my hip and I know he definitely heard her. He's texted me about it.

"I knew you had a thing for me really, is it my charming smile?"

"It's not your mouth or anything to do with it," I reply, laughing as I push him away by his face when he gets too close. "Or what comes out of it."

"Or what I *can* do with it." He taps the end of my nose with the tip of his tongue making me dramatically wipe it off.

Ezra laughs, he doesn't look upset and I'm relieved by that. I have no control over Laurie or Robert, it wouldn't be fair to take the blame for their shit. Besides, it's all good fun.

Ezra: You prefer Aladdin to Hercules and I look more like Aladdin. ;-)

I snort and shake my head at him. He's right though. Aladdin is my preferred movie.

"Want to *sleep* in my hotel room later?" Robert asks, wagging his brows. "I miss your arm hitting me in the face and your knee in my side."

"I could demonstrate both of those right now."

This time he pushes me back by my face except his hand is a lot larger than mine and his strength a lot more intense. I fall into Laurie and almost roll off the narrow leather booth seat completely.

As always, what an amazing night.

I'm sad when it ends.

Well… that is until Ezra wakes up in the middle of the night to his phone ringing over and over again.

My head is throbbing, and the noise isn't helping. I'm also still drunk.

"Shut it off," I groan, pulling his pillow over my head when he sits up after unwrapping his body from mine. It smells so good.

"Hello?" he grumbles sounding as tired as I feel. I check the clock on the nightstand, it's three in the morning, we've only been home for two hours. That's why I'm still drunk.

He sounds a lot more sober when he hears shrieking on the other end. "Elizabeth… what is it?"

"You were out dancing with THAT WHORE!" I hear her shrill tone and immediately sit up. Is this it? Have we been caught?

Why does she insist on calling me a whore?

And this is exactly why I invited buffers because if Laurie hadn't been there to distract me, I might've done more than dance with him.

I hear her erratic, screeching tone but can't make out what she's saying, or sobbing. Ezra tries to cut in every so often, but he ends up standing and pacing out in the hall.

"Don't do that, don't be an idiot," he begs her, and I hear her shrill tone some more.

I lie in bed with a hammering heart, feeling sorry for her while hating myself, but also feeling sorry for me because I know what's about to come.

After a five-minute conversation he enters the bedroom and the bed dips when he puts his knee on it.

"I have to go," he whispers, leaning over me to kiss my forehead.

"Don't," I plead, holding his arm.

"I have to, I've never heard her sound so bad." He stands and pulls on his pants, the belt rattles and change in his pocket jingles.

"Don't go," I beg again, sitting up and peering at his silhouette in the dark. "Please. I have a bad feeling."

"She's my wife," he replies, sounding torn. "I've *never* heard her like this."

"If you go now, you'll be giving her false hope. She'll never stop trying."

"You're young, you've never been married, you don't get it. I can't just leave her. Not when I'm the cause of her pain."

I watch him walk away and repeat, "I have a bad feeling."

"I'll be back before sunrise." He kisses me again and leaves without looking back.

He leaves me to my thoughts. I pace, click and count but nothing soothes me. Thoughts of him tangled together in a bed with her. Thoughts of her convincing him to stay with her forever.

I head to the kitchen to have another drink to calm my nerves, wine left over from dinner. It's warm but it does the job. Then I brush my teeth, counting that too, brushing them so much my gums bleed.

I want him to walk back through the door and just tell me everything is going to be okay.

An hour passes and he doesn't. I curl up in our bed and tap my fingers on my phone screen, wishing for it to ring but only because of a call from him. I fight sleep for as long as I can but eventually the alcohol in my system makes it impossible to avoid. I collapse, my head on his pillow because it smells like him and I'm *that* sentimental and lovesick.

He returns at sunrise and climbs into bed. When he reaches for me, I roll away. Maybe it's immature and petulant but am I right in thinking that he left her and asked me to commit to him. Going out at three in the morning to see his ex-wife doesn't feel like he's committed to me. I shower, dress, and head out to meet Robert without him.

He should never have left last night; it has cast such a shadow of doubt over our relationship that I was finally starting to get comfortable in.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-Two

How jealous he gets without trying to control me.

Robert and I decided on Universal Studios. I've lived here my entire life and have never been. I've been to Disneyland but never Universal and to say we had an amazing time is an understatement.

Robert has this incredible ability to make me forget about everything else when I'm with him. He's funny and charismatic and self-deprecating in such a hilarious way. He's what I'd call a crude gentleman. He will buy the drinks, carry the things, hold the doors, and *"accidentally"* touch my butt and suggest that maybe we should have a quickie in the bathroom. But I know if I told him to stop, he would. He's just so much fun and easy to be with.

He makes you feel so comfortable around him, like he forever acts the bigger fool, and nothing phases him.

This casts another shadow of doubt on my relationship.

"Get off your phone," Robert admonishes playfully, trying to snatch it from my hand.

"It's Izabella. One second." I press my palm against his face. It's just something we do to each other when the other is being annoying.

Izabella: Do you want to join Maria and me for lunch tomorrow? We haven't seen you in so long.

I hesitate because… should I?

Rose: I'd love to, though I am at work, but I should be able to get two hours. Just let me know where and when. Why isn't Maria at school?

Izabella: Mid-winter break. We'll come to you.

I thought she just had that. I'm clearly not paying enough attention. Every day is blurring into one, I'm having too much fun, I've just been

too happy. It's not good really.

Rose: Awesome. I look forward to seeing her.

Izabella: She does too.

Rose: And you of course.

Izabella: Well, that goes without saying.

"Done," I tell Robert who waits for me to put my phone away before taking my hand in his. His eyes are cautiously regarding me as though wondering how I'll react.

I hold his hand for all of twelve seconds and find an excuse to let it go. I don't want to hurt him but I also don't want to lead him on.

"Is it the long-distance thing?" he asks, startling me as we make our way out of the park. I didn't expect him to broach the topic. "Because I come back here all the time."

"No, it's not that," I reply, choosing honesty. "I'm sort of maybe… I'm hung up on a guy right now."

Surprise flashes in his eyes. "That Pax douchebag?"

"Definitely not him." Just thinking about him makes me cringe.

"Who?"

"Nobody you know," I lie, and he sees straight through me. I'm a terrible liar. My twitches give me away, always forcing their way out when I'm in the middle of an uncomfortable situation.

"You're in love with Cunty." And then his eyes widen. "Are you sleeping with him? Is that why he's getting a—"

"Don't," I beg, gripping his arm, eyes filling with tears. "I regard you as a good friend, you make me so happy whenever we talk or hang out. I don't want to lose you."

"Please don't cry." He pulls me into his chest, and we hug briefly, it's not intimate, it doesn't fill me with silent butterflies battering their wings inside my body. But it's nice, warm, and comfy. "No judgement here. Just disappointment."

"I just… it's not how it sounds."

He raises a brow. "You mean you didn't have an affair with your married boss? Every boss' fantasy, by the way."

"I wish I could excuse it all, but I can't. We just clicked… you know? And everything just happened. I didn't actively seek out a married man. Trust me. The only reason I'm sticking around for all of this is because of how I feel about him. If I didn't love him like I do it *never* would have happened. The drama and the sneaking are *killing*

me. It keeps me up at night. I don't want anybody to get hurt."

He nods thoughtfully, guiding us to his rental car in the lot. "Then perhaps you should end it until you're sure it's what you both want? Then pick up where you left off in a few months? That way nobody gets hurt."

The wisest suggestion yet. "That's some solid advice there, Robert."

"I have my moments."

"I've been considering that too, but I'm terrified Ezra will go back to his wife."

"You mean… where he should be?" he comments and my face falls, so does my heart and my willpower. *I've been considering that too*. "I'm not trying to be a dick. I just think that when you marry someone, unless either is abusive, you should be together for life. Too many people rush into divorce that marriage has become such a joke."

"Is that why you're not married yet?"

"Yep," he replies, grinning at me. "Because I believe in the sanctity of it and you can be damn sure I'll not leave my wife for another woman."

"He says he's not leaving her for me."

"And you believe him?"

I shake my head solemnly. "But what if you fall in love with somebody else unintentionally?"

"I'll remind myself why I married my wife first."

This is all easier said not done. He's not in our shoes so he doesn't know, not really. He didn't hear our conversations and see our spark and witness the intense touches we shared.

Feelings like that don't happen with everybody. We have something special.

I wet my lips and look up at the blue sky, leaning my arms on the door of his rental car. "Do you think that's all he needs? A reminder of why he loved her to begin with?"

"Definitely, he's not going to get that with you standing in his way."

I know he's not saying it to be cruel or conniving and I love that he's defending his friend's marriage. But I don't know… I just don't know what to think.

"I was there when they got married, remember?" he says, climbing into the car and buckling in. I follow after a moment and look at him, eyes still blurry with unshed tears.

"Was he in love with her?"

"Absolutely." He places his hand on mine when I tense and look away. Hurt by his easy admission. "You're new and shiny, and perhaps he does love you, but he's not single and he needs to remember that."

Fuck… his words are hitting me so hard.

“I love him.”

“He’s your first love, it was unfair of him to take that from you when he can’t give you what you need and deserve in return.” His hand squeezes comfortingly and then reaches up to catch a tear rolling down my cheek. “I’m not going to tell you what to do but think about what I’ve said.”

“He loved me before I changed my style,” I point out, “most men wouldn’t even give me a second glance.”

“If that’s what you think, you’re an idiot,” he jests, shaking his head at me. “Back then you were shy and unapproachable. Whenever I tried talking to you, you fled the room or blushed to the shade of a beet.”

He has a point.

“Now you’re confident but still quiet, so very sexy, but you always have been, just in different ways.” He smiles at me. “I’m older than you by a decade—”

“Twelve years.”

“Whatever… my point is, I’m at an age where I know what I want and that means Ezra is too. Maybe I’m the one who’s wrong about his marriage and how it should be. But do you really want to put your faith in a man who broke what should be an unbreakable vow, *for you*? Put yourself in his wife’s shoes… maybe he is a loyal and loving husband for the most part… but how well do you actually know him? Do you think she thought their love would last a lifetime when she agreed to marry him? Do you think you’re the only one?”

“You think he’s a fuckboy?”

“I think there’s every chance that you won’t be so shiny in a couple of years, just like his wife.”

I groan, even more confused than before. “Let’s stop talking about this now. I want to enjoy your company and not think about him.”

“Maybe you’ll switch teams and fall in love with me instead?”

“I wish,” I mumble, and then blink slowly. I can’t believe I just said that.

“You do, do you?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Oh I do… and this now feels like a challenge to me. Sounds like I’ve already got a foot in the door.”

“There’s no foot in anybody’s door.”

“I’m going to woo you and make you ask, *Cunty who?*”

I laugh and slap his chest. “He’s your friend, behave yourself.”

“Didn’t stop him from sleeping with you when he knew I liked you first. As far as I’m concerned, now you are fair game.”

He liked me first?

“I’m not a piece of meat.” I laugh, secretly loving the attention.

“I’m also nothing special.”

“You’re the most fun I’ve had in years with the best ass I’ve seen in years. That’s all I need.”

I roll my eyes, stilling smiling. “When do you go back to Seattle?”

“Something is telling me to extend my visit by a few days.”

“Stoooooppp,” I plead, giggling near uncontrollably.

“Well, promise me you’ll visit me soon. Halley and the rest of my crazy friends want to do karaoke battle with you, even though you never remember the words. Photographic memory but can’t sing lyrics for shit.”

“I was hammered. Like a lot. So shut it. You didn’t do too great yourself.”

“Fair point. Fair point.”

We smile until my cheeks ache and then my smile fades as we pass a billboard of a happy couple in front of a new home. It reminds me of everything I keep trying to forger. “Do you think I’m a terrible person?”

“I think desire and lust can drive good people to do terrible things, but no, I don’t think you’re a terrible person. I think you’re a great person and you’re not losing me as a friend over this.”

“Promise?”

He wrinkles his nose at me and crosses his eyes after stopping at a red light. “You gonna make me swear it with a pinky promise?”

“I don’t know what that is, so no,” I reply around a genuine giggle.

“You don’t know what a pinkie promise is?” His look is one of utter horror. “How do you not know the basic rite that is a pinkie promise?” He hooks his pinkie finger around mine. “I pinkie promise that I will not fall out with you because you prefer my married friend’s penis to mine.”

“You’re not funny,” I grumble, pouting at him while still squeezing his pinkie finger.

“I’m not kidding. Want to compare before I leave?”

“Compare?”

“Our penises.”

Laughing, I pull my hand free and twist his nipple through his shirt. “Let’s go Casa-no-no. Want a tour of my new digs? Compliments of the adulterer?”

“You’re living with him?”

“I love him.”

“Is that going to be your answer for everything until you find something better to say?”

I shrug my shoulders. “What’s better than love?”

“You got me there.”

When I walk into my apartment I smile when I see fresh flowers in the vase on the half-moon table to my right. I dump my keys in the little dish there and lead Robert further inside.

"I'm home," I call but there's no answer. His keys aren't in the dish and his sneakers aren't there…

Looks like he's not home. I immediately let my internal gauge jump to extreme panic. I check my phone and wince when I see five missed calls and a text from him.

Ezra: Where the fuck are you?

Rose: I just got home. I'm sorry. What's wrong?

Ezra: Home from where?

I call him, figuring this will be a better conversation to have over the phone.

"Hey," he says softly, sounding nicer than his texts. I must have read them in the wrong tone. "Where have you been?"

"With Robert. We went to Universal Studios."

"You've been with him all this time?"

Uh-oh, the tone is back. "Yeah…"

"She sure has, Cunty," Robert interjects so I slap my hand over his mouth.

He laughs and steps away from me. "I'll make coffee."

"I've got it," I call, following him. "Ezra, we're at home. He knows about us."

"Huh, does he?"

"He kind of guessed."

There's silence.

"Ezra?"

"I'm here." He clears his throat. "Just processing."

"I know that feeling…" I wasn't meant to say this aloud.

"I shouldn't have gone last night."

I glance at Robert and smack his hand when he reaches for the coffee grinder. Laughing, he moves to the machine, ducking when I throw a silicone oven glove at his head. It thuds on the wall behind him.

"Are you there?"

"Y… yeah," I squeak, dodging the same glove when it returns. "We'll talk when you get here. Okay?"

“What the fuck are you two doing?”

“Fighting over coffee,” I grind out, squealing when he twists a towel and flicks it at my thigh. “Just hurry home safe.” I hang up and turn on the maniacally grinning Robert. “Oh, you’re so fucking dead.”

It takes Ezra no time to get here, and when he does, he’s covered in sweat, wearing a dark gray wife beater and lighter gray shorts. He’s been working out. He catches the flare in my eyes and winks.

“Here’s the adultering dog,” Robert comments and though his lips are smiling, Ezra and I both caught his tone.

“Don’t,” Ezra mutters when I walk to him and kiss his lips. He grins and winks at me and wipes his face and neck with the towel hanging over his shoulder. “Did you have fun?”

“It was *insane*,” I respond energetically. “Right, Rob?”

“What she said,” he replies, eyes on Ezra but they lack that friendly light that usually glows from them. “Can I have a word?”

“I was waiting for it,” Ezra mutters and sighs gravely. He kisses my temple, squeezes my hip, and they both go out into the hall. I leave them to it; I don’t spy though I really want to.

When they return it seems the air has been cleared though it took nearly thirty minutes. I brew a fresh pot of coffee and giggle when Ezra wraps his arms around my waist and bites my neck.

“I love you,” he whispers in my ear sending a tingle of warmth down my spine. “Sei cosi importante per me. Don’t listen to others. They don’t know us or what we have.”

“Ti amo,” I reply just as quietly and turn in his arms to accept the kiss he grants me.

We only pull away when Robert clears his throat and mutters, “I need to get laid.”

I laugh at him over Ezra’s shoulder and he winks at me, a sadness to his eyes that I don’t understand but also acceptance.

The next day when I accompany him to the airport, I learn that the acceptance was because Ezra persuaded him. Apparently, they had heated words where Robert told Ezra to let me go, but Ezra convinced him that maybe, just maybe he’d found happiness beyond compare.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-Three

He takes my side, even against the ones he loves the most.

"Why are you so beautiful?" Ezra asks as I lean over his desk highlighting key parts of a sales sheet that he needs to go over. We've been ordering parts that we no longer use, a stupid error but an expensive one.

My cheeks heat. I ignore him and keep doing what I'm doing.

"Let's go away for a week. Use our annual leave to go somewhere together." His suggestion has me looking up from my job and my smile lifts when I see he's serious. "Rome? Paris? The Maldives?"

"And who is going to look after the office?"

"We'll schedule around it, there are people who can step in and take over the less important things that we do." He trails his fingers up my arm. I shiver and my skin breaks out in tiny little goosepimples. "What do you think?"

"Somewhere warm and quiet…" I slide onto his lap. "With beautiful places to explore, and a sea to swim in."

"I'll get to see you in bikinis all day every day, I want you to wear nothing else. Except maybe…" His hand slides down my leg, massaging and kneading as it goes, before it lifts my foot high, showing my high-heeled black pumps. The underside is red, and they were very expensive. One of Ezra's many gifts that I keep finding in my closet. He will order things for me or buy things himself, things he wants to see me in.

"These. The way your legs look when you wear heels."

It makes me feel so incredibly sexy, especially when I surprise him by waiting somewhere in our apartment wearing the lingerie and heels he purchased for me. This morning I waited on the balcony in nothing but these heels and black lace over a dark green satin negligee. We didn't have time to have sex, but we did make out like teenagers, groping each other and grinding all up on each other's bodies.

He can't keep his hands off me as it is, but when I'm in such a state of dress, he's even more attentive which is saying something.

He kisses the inside of my knee and lifts me onto his desk. “Now sit still while I eat you.”

I remember when I used to be shy when he treated me like this, I’d try to find excuses to make him stop, but now I just place my heel-clad feet onto the arms of his chair and hold my weight on my arms as he dines on me like a starving man.

“If I didn’t love you before,” I breathe as he pushes a finger inside of me and sucks on my clit. “I do now.”

I wave excitedly at Izabella who is sitting alone on the veranda of a local café.

When I approach, she stands and kisses my cheeks before motioning to my latte.

“I got your usual choice, service is slow today.”

I look at the bustling business and smile. “I appreciate it.”

I stir my drink, sip it and hum happily.

“Where’s Maria?” I ask, looking around as I take the only available seat at the small table.

My lips part as she assesses me with hard eyes but doesn’t reply. Her gaze drifts to the collar of my shirt and the red mark on my neck above it.

“In my day, those were really tacky.”

I raise my collar and laugh nervously. My fingers tap against the side of my warm mug. “I think they still are, but I suppose they can’t be helped sometimes. Sorry. I should have covered it better.”

She sips her drink, her gaze still harsh and colder than I’ve ever seen it.

“I wasn’t aware you were seeing anybody?”

Oh shit.

She looks at my tapping fingers, so I release my mug and laugh nervously. “Just having casual sex.” I can’t hold her eyes. This is awkward. I have a bad feeling.

“You’re driving my son’s car?” Her tone is suspicious, her eyes are too, her body is tense.

“How do you—”

“I saw you come into the parking lot.”

“He was kind enough to loan it to me,” I reply, it’s the truth. That’s probably not the only truth I’ll be telling her today. This is not going well.

“He’s good to you, my son?”

Oh dear. I really don’t feel good anymore. I squirm in my seat, looking everywhere but at her.

“Always. He’s a great friend.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me, right?” she repeats her question from our last meeting and my heart sinks into my stomach. Her tone is bold, hurt. Her eyes magnify it. “Because we’re friends and friends don’t lie to each other.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Stop.” She slams her hand down onto the table, and I halt my fingers from beating a casual rhythm. I hadn’t realized I was even doing it. I shift in my seat, bouncing slightly, unable to keep still.

“Is there a reason you’re so jittery?”

I shake my head, feeling my eyes burn. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be.”

She slams her hand down on the tabletop again, over my tapping hand which restarted what I thought I’d stopped, making me jump a foot out of my seat. “You’re having an affair with him, aren’t you?” I’m stunned. I don’t know what to say so I just stare at her with panicked eyes while trying to pull my hand free. “I knew this would happen. I warned him to get rid of you.”

I’m shaking. I wasn’t expecting this as I should have been. “Where’s Maria?”

“I lied about Maria, because whenever I have suggested lunch alone over the past few weeks, you have turned me down and now that my daughter-in-law has come to me crying that my son has filed for divorce, I know why.”

Oh no. This is not good at all.

“You lied to me,” she hisses. “You lied to my face. After everything I’ve done for you. After I took you into my home, and my heart.”

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur, hiccupping lightly. “I never wanted to hurt anyone. Neither of us did.”

“My granddaughter is hurt.”

I wince at that.

“His *wife* is hurt.”

“I really think you should be talking to Ezra about this.”

She shakes her head. “My son is weak. Only weak men abandon their wives for girls half their age. There’s no talking to him.”

“He’s not weak,” I implore, “it’s way more complicated than that.”

“There’s nothing complicated about the shame of a woman who disgraces her sister by sleeping with her husband.” She leans towards me, her gray eyes blazing with anger as my hazel eyes burn with the tears that flow freely down my face. “It gets no lower than that in one’s life. I understand desire and passion and I certainly understand sex. But to claim a man as your own when he has promised his soul to another, there is no greater shame.”

“I love him.” My breathing is staggered.

“He’s not yours to love.” She’s so angry and so offended but worst of all I can see that she feels betrayed. I’m trembling, not from fear but from the shame she condemns me with. “Leave him, give him back to his wife and child, if you love him as you say you do, you’ll understand that is where he belongs.”

“That’s not my choice to make.” I sniff, using the napkin to wipe under my eyes.

“Yes, it is.”

“He won’t go back to her even if I do leave, and I don’t want him to go back,” I admit aloud, sounding stronger now and her hands ball into fists on the table. “He’s my best friend. He’s the love of my life. I couldn’t walk away from him even if I wanted to.”

“And what about Elizabeth? Don’t you care about her in this? And Maria? She wants her daddy home.”

“I’ll never take him away from his daughter. In a few months this will all blow over and she’ll be around our apartment whenever she likes.”

“*Apartment*?” she screeches, eyes wide, lips parted. “Oh, you foolish girl. That foolish man. Poor Elizabeth.”

“You don’t even like her,” I reply, feeling braver now though I’m still trembling. I don’t want to fall out with Ezra’s mom, but I also want her to see this from my side. I’m feeling defensive despite the fact I’m probably wrong in all this. “She’s rude and obnoxious to everybody who isn’t on her level. She doesn’t want Ezra to have anything to do with you and you know it. Do you think she’d care if your roles were reversed?”

She doesn’t deny it, she just stares at me, chest heaving, nostrils flaring.

“I’m in love with your son, I know how we’ve gone about it is wrong but it’s not changing, and I don’t want to lose the friendship we had. You might hate me now, but I plan on being with him for a really long time—”

“Funnily enough,” she says around a sardonic laugh, “his wife said the same thing.”

I gasp when my warm latte hits me in the face.

She threw my drink at me.

She actually just threw my drink at me.

As I blink in shock she stands and throws a few bills on the table.

“Affairs never last, he’ll be back with Elizabeth before the year ends and you’ll be the disloyal harlot that never was.” She clutches her purse and walks away from me as I wipe my face with a napkin.

Need to shower.

I dig my fingernails into my palms.

“Are you okay?” somebody from a few tables away asks as I gather

myself, trying not to sob like a baby.

I nod and scarper back to my car as quickly as my jellified legs can get me there.

Izabella is a fierce Italian woman and is protecting her own. I just can't help but feel how unfair this is that I'm getting all the blame and losing all the people I love. But then doesn't that just describe my entire life to date?

"Ezra?" I cry once in the safety of my vehicle. My hands twist the steering wheel, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth…

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Your mom knows, she just threw a drink in my face."

"What?" His tone is deep and dangerous, and I hear his chair squeak in the background. I should really oil that. I keep saying I will.

"And I lied to her, for you, and she hates me. She'll never forgive me."

"Where are you?"

"Kennewick's Café's parking lot."

"Okay, I'm coming."

"No… no… it's okay, you've got a lot to do," I reply, sniffling unattractively. "I'm just going to go home and shower."

"I said I'm coming. Stay there."

Fifteen minutes later, he shows up, abandoning his car across three empty spaces and pulling my coffee-soaked self into his body. He cups my face after a moment which is clean for the most part and kisses every inch of it.

"This will not happen again, I swear it," he whispers, hugging me tighter than he ever has. "Don't cry, you're breaking me." His lips touch my temple and his hand cradles the back of my head. "I will deal with this."

I don't tell him not to because I don't have the energy to argue with him right now. Instead I climb into his car, trusting him to deal with the other and wait for him to click me in. He kisses my lips as he leans around me and then puts the car in gear.

He takes me home, keeping his hand on me the entire ride. I can see the tension in his jaw and around the soft lines of his eyes.

When we enter our building, he winks at me, his lips not quite making a smile, and when we enter our apartment, he peels me out of my clothing and helps me into the shower.

I hold his naked, wet chest, keeping my cheek against it as his hands roam up and down my back. We shower together, washing each other and staying connected in some way throughout the entire sensual process.

He's just everything to me and I'm not sure if he knows it.

"Nobody believes that you love me, do they?" I say quietly when he sits me on the side of the bed in a fluffy towel while padding to the closet with his own towel around his waist. My heart is a dull murmur in my chest. I have never felt so defeated and stepped on. "She thinks you're going to get bored of me soon and leave me to go back to Elizabeth."

He turns back to me and just looks at me for the longest time. "Does it matter what anybody else thinks?"

"Yes, because that's your mom and if we're going to get married and have lots of little Italian-looking babies, then I need a good relationship with her. Now I'm never going to have one. Your family will only ever see me as the woman who sabotaged your marriage and Izabella will never trust me again. I lied to her."

"But you didn't ruin my marriage and we all make mistakes," he insists, pulling me up to stand before him. My towel drops to the ground, so he bends, picks it up and kisses my tight stomach on the way up. "I didn't realize how stale my marriage was until you."

"Isn't that what all married couples say when they have an affair?"

"Perhaps there's a reason for that in some of those cases," he grumbles, wrapping me in a towel cocoon and holding me to his chest. My hands are trapped between us and the soft material that smells like roses. "Do you want to know the truth?"

"Do I not know it already?"

"No, we haven't spoken about Elizabeth…"

"Because it's not my business."

"But maybe it should be. The other night my wife threatened to kill herself, a ploy to get me close." I tense at his words, feeling horrified that anybody could be capable of such madness. "She threw herself at me again, like the last time, and I turned her down. It was then that I fully realized something." He pulls the towel from my head, letting my wet hair fall into a spiral over my shoulder. "My wife didn't work, didn't decorate, had no hobby outside of shopping and visiting spas and going for coffee with her friends. She *never* had time for me and hardly had time for our daughter."

That makes me sad to know but I already kind of knew it was the case.

"She never just dropped down on her knees and took me in her mouth and she always rejected me when I tried to do the same to her. The only time we had sex anymore was in my office and that's because she wanted *you* to hear. I loved her, I still do, I loved her, and I was attracted to her, but our levels of passion were never aligned."

He squeezes me again, grinding his hardened cock against my groin. I hold back a whimper, wishing we could end this conversation

and just fuck. I don't want to hear about him and his wife.

"I saw that passion in other people who couldn't keep their hands to themselves. And I realized that's how I felt… that's what I wanted but I just couldn't coax her into it. I wasn't unhappy, I accepted it for what it was and moved on." He smiles sadly and kisses the end of my nose.

"But then I found you. I craved you. I hungered for you. I felt the type of passion and desperation that I'd been looking for." His eyes darken and his hands grip my rear squeezing it until it almost hurts. "I fucked my wife over my desk and pretended she was you. It's the only place I could get hard anymore. She started noticing that my interests were drifting, I couldn't help it, but I couldn't get hard for her anymore. Except in the office, and even then, it was stale. The sex was just sex. The hardest I'd come in months since seeing you in that red dress in Houston was the moment you walked through the door and caught me fucking my wife."

My breath catches at his admission and moisture pools between my thighs.

"I saw your eyes, your startled look, your perfect fucking lips parting as though beckoning me to push my cock between them, and I came so hard and so fast. *In my wife.*"

I close my eyes, remembering that moment. This is making me so hot when it shouldn't be.

He continues, his voice soft, "Does that make me a terrible person? Fuck yes. But I know that even if you leave me, I will still want *you* and *not* my wife. This isn't right what we have but we have it and everybody will get over it. I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose this. I refuse. I love you, tesoro mio."

"What does that mean?"

"My treasure," he replies, pressing his forehead to mine. "Robert was wrong what he said about me ever being in love with Elizabeth. I have never felt like this about anybody except Maria and that's a different kind of love."

"Obviously."

He smiles with his eyes and I lose myself in their perfection, not needing to count the flecks and shards because he makes me forget about counting and my anxieties.

"I would give my life for you, cuore mio, and I wouldn't have to think about it."

"You hardly know me."

"I know you."

"You d—"

"*I know you*," he insists, giving me a pointed look. "I don't know everything about you, but I know enough to know that I want to be

with you. Don't you feel the same?"

"You know I do."

"Then let's keep going as we are. I will deal with my family. They will come around and all will work out for the best."

"Promise?"

"I do. I'm not walking away from this, Rose. I'm not walking away from you."

I kiss his chin, smiling when his growing mustache tickles my nostril. "Were you serious about that trip away?"

"Definitely."

"Then let's do it."

"I will make the arrangements."

At that, I snort and raise my brows.

"Okay, I will have my beautiful PA make the arrangements."

"Figured as much." I drop the towel and pull away his. "We have time, right?"

Grinning, he throws me backwards onto the bed making me squeal and then covers my body with his.

We have the most amazing sex as always and lie together in each other's arms soon after. Sweaty and panting, but sated and relaxed.

"We're going to tell people we're dating," he says suddenly and my heart stops. "No more keeping you in the shadows like some dirty secret."

"What?"

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-Four

He makes me feel beautiful. So beautiful.

This week has been all about those confessions and being honest but telling Laurie over cookie dough might not have been my best idea.

She drops her loaded spoon onto the table, her mouth hanging open. I've never seen her so still. For a moment I worry I might have shocked the tics right out of her.

"YOU'RE FUCKING YOUR BOSS?" she shrieks, finally coming out of her awake-comatose state.

Everybody looks our way… she was *that* loud.

"Shhh." I flick a bit of ice cream at her face from my spoon. "There are children present."

She searches the room with her wide eyes and gaping mouth. I don't think she's breathing.

"Do you hate me?"

She sits back and covers her face with her hands, eyes peeking through gaps in her fingers.

We sit like this forever, letting ice cream melt and cookie dough cool as she practices a certain stillness that she never has been able to before.

"*Do you hate me*?"

"No," she blurts, letting both palms hit the table. "How could I hate you? I'm surprised. I was not expecting that at all. Truth be told I was worried you were going to get back with Pax, so this is actually a bit of relief."

"Eww. No way."

"Exactly… I guess… One, I'm jealous. Two, Mrs. Cuntyflaps is on my shit list, so I don't care. I'm just glad you fucked her husband before I did purely to piss her off."

"Not funny."

"It kind of is." She stifles her smile with the tips of her fingers. "I mean you've had office sex… *you*. With your married boss. Nuh-uh. No way. You never did."

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

"You didn't lose your virginity until college and you cried for two weeks after. You wouldn't kiss boys on the mouth because it's gross. You passed out when we watched porn together as teens."

"It was anal," I hiss, glaring at her. "It freaked me out."

"ACHOOO!" she yells and then shakes her head violently. She didn't sneeze, she just had a big tic release. She must have really been stifling herself.

"Oh God no, you're not starting that one again, are you?" I ask, frowning. It's the only tic of hers that I struggle to deal with because it makes me jump. It's such a loud and aggressive sound. She said it constantly for about four months once. It was hell for me because we lived together back then, but worse for her of course because it really held her back.

"ACHOOO!" she goes again, this time both of her arms fly up. She bangs one of them on the underside of the table.

I laugh and rub it for her. "You good?"

"I'm just startled by this information. Good girl Rose, my little flower, my virginal nun buddy…"

"Okay, I was never *that* bad."

"*You fainted at the sight of anal sex*."

"At that point I didn't even know what real sex was," I whisper.

"ANAL SEX IS A TREE-HUGGING WEIRDO!"

I press my lips together. "Is it really?"

Her hands go up again as do her nerves when everybody turns our way and a woman at the table to the right of us snarls, "Do you mind?"

"MIND MATTERS AND THE BUM PEAS!"

"Cool band, bro," I say, still trying not to laugh.

"What is wrong with you?" the woman hisses, and I see Laurie's face fall.

"She has Tourette's syndrome, she can't help it," I explain, a warning bite to my tone.

The woman, sensing my willingness to stick an ice cream in her face, looks at her friend with a roll of her eyes, but her friend is smiling kindly and mouths an apology our way.

"Fuck her husband while you're on a roll too," Laurie says way too loudly, pointing her thumb at the woman with a stick up her ass.

"Okay, let's go," I say, standing and now I'm definitely laughing.

"So…" Laurie hooks her arm through mine as we go. I can feel her constantly twitching and wonder if she forgot her meds this morning. "What's he like?"

"I'm not talking about it." My cheeks are heating when I think of how he had me on the kitchen worktop just this morning. I lose all

inhibitions with him, but I suppose that's what's supposed to happen.

He has been so good to me since what happened with his mom. He yelled at her over the phone in Italian, I even heard him curse a couple of times. But whatever was said he didn't bring it back to the bedroom, he just let it go and we cooked dinner together after going grocery shopping. Since he made the decision to tell his wife… ex-wife… whatever she is, he's been more brazen with our outings.

They're getting together after their first divorce hearing next week and he's going to tell her then. After they've resolved childcare issues, he wouldn't put it past her to use Maria as a weapon, something that absolutely cannot happen.

I'm scared but also excited because this is the end of all the sneaking. We can now be open about our feelings for each other. And true to his word, Ezra has funded a week break for us. I'm disappointed that we can't take Maria but it's understandable. It's too soon for that and Ezra is spending the following week alone with her anyway. I'll be going back to work that week and taking over his job too which means double pay, woohoo.

"So, you definitely don't hate me?" I ask Laurie, just to confirm.

"No, I don't hate you. You're too nice to hate. You maybe shouldn't have fucked a married man, but you don't know the bitch, you don't owe her anything and she was always a massive cunt to you anyway."

I hug her arm and sigh. "I just don't want anyone to get hurt."

"Meh. Life hurts. Just guard your heart. I know he's adamant he's leaving but if I had a quarter for every time a married man actually leaves his wife for the mistress… I'd have less money than I have now."

"I'm not worried about that."

"You probably should, if only a little, just to prepare in case."

Maybe she's right. But I feel like I stressed myself out enough over all of the worrying I did before.

"Stop it," she admonishes, pulling me to a halt in the busy street. "I can see you panicking but you need to stop. You're not a bad person. You've fallen in love and so did he. That's a beautiful thing. Focus on that part of it, okay? You have a man that loves you enough to yell at his own mother to defend you. That's fucking huge. ACHOOOOO!"

I pull her in for a hug because that's exactly what I needed to hear from her. "I love you, Laurie. Family until we die."

"Duh." She leans back. "Are you on birth control?"

"I'm almost twenty-five. Of course, I'm on birth control."

"Good. Me too."

"That's good to know."

Her head twitches to the side and she startles a man passing us by shrieking, "STOP LOOKING AT MY CAR!"

“The fuck?” he whispers, eyes wide as he passes us sideways.

“Babe, you don’t have a car.”

“Shut up.”

I pull her along, giggling as I go.

“Happy birthday, handsome,” I say, kissing his cheek and then his ear.

He groans and stretches when I move away to grab the breakfast tray that I placed on the nightstand.

“It was my birthday two weeks ago,” he responds but is still smiling.

“Duh,” I reply, waiting for him to sit up and rub his eyes before I rest the tray on his lap. “But I didn’t get to see you, so I figured I’d surprise you when you least expected it.”

“You certainly have,” he murmurs, tilting his head back for a kiss.

He yawns and sips the coffee I made for him, yanking on a lock of my hair when I neaten the square plate on his tray, so it lines up perfectly with all the edges. “You’ve been anxious since what happened with my mom.”

“Can you blame me?”

“No. But I hate to see you so clearly agitated all the time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” He places his coffee down and cups my cheek with his hand. “Don’t ever be sorry for feeling things. *Ever*. I know this has put us both under a lot of pressure. You more so than me in some cases. But we can get past this. You’ll see.”

I kiss his palm and take a bite of his toast. “We have a couple of hours before we have to go into the office. What do you want to do?”

“Is it that early?” he asks, looking at the digital clock on the nightstand. “Yep… it’s *that* early.” He’s not upset, he’s smiling.

“I want to book that vacation. I *need* a vacation. Just you and me away for the week after I tell my wife. It’ll give her a chance to calm down.”

“I don’t think she’ll be calm knowing you’ve run away to another country with another woman.”

“Fair point,” he mumbles and digs into his breakfast. I kiss his head and inhale. I love his smell. He always smells so citrussy and clean.

“So… I was talking to Laurie the other day about us…”

His fork hovers between his open mouth and the tray. “And?”

Chewing on my lip, I pick at a piece of fluff on the quilt and look away feeling shy suddenly.

“What is it?”

“Do you want more kids one day?”

He lowers his fork and places it on the plate.

When he doesn’t immediately answer I continue, my voice a ramble, “Because, obviously not yet but in the future, I’ll probably want kids and I know Maria is older, so I wasn’t sure... I mentioned it a while ago and you didn’t react to it, so I don’t know what that means and that’s why I’m asking. And I was just kidding when I said I like order too much. I do like order but not so much that I don’t want my own kids.”

He moves the tray onto his nightstand, and I worry for a moment that he’s going to leave me and say no, thank you, but instead, he hooks me around the neck with his hand and brings our faces together until our lips collide.

“I taste like toast,” I mutter, laughing when he rolls me onto my back.

“You want kids with me?”

I shrug. “One day… I never had family, so I want a big one. I want three kids, and I want them to have at least two kids each, so I always have grandchildren in my house.”

“That’s an ambitious number of children,” he comments, smirking down at me.

“So, is it something you might want?”

His lips stretch with a smile and he slots his body between my thighs. “With you? Definitely. I love kids, especially my own. We can have as many as you want.”

My heart gives a happy flip. “Seriously?”

“Absolutely. Let’s start right now,” he buries his face in my neck.

“Don’t be stupid.” I slap his shoulder and moan when he grinds against me.

“I’m serious,” he replies, scanning my face with his eyes when he hovers over me again. I love how stormy they look, how alive and vibrant. I wonder if he can see the same life in mine. “Let’s do it. Let’s pull the goalie.”

My breath catches in my throat at his expression. He’s not kidding. “I’m not about to get pregnant to a man who is still married to somebody else.” I give him a shove until he’s on his back and then straddle him. “But if you get the divorce… we could probably consider *pulling the goalie* as you so aptly put it.”

His smile is blinding. He folds his arms behind his head and just keeps smiling at me. “I knew you were going to be the best decision I ever made.”

“Stop it.” I twist his perfect, pointed nipple making him flinch slightly. “Stop being so perfect because nothing is perfect and if you don’t reveal your massive flaw to me soon, the fates are going to

intervene and ruin this all for us."

"You're so weird," he comments as his body shakes with laughter. "I'm not perfect, I'm just perfect for you. You make me so different to how I am with everyone else. I constantly just want to be everything you need."

"I feel the same. Nothing I do for you feels like a chore; you know? I always just want to see you happy."

"I know the feeling." His large hands move from under his head to grab my waist as I sit on his cock which is rock solid between us. "Come on, as much as I want to sink inside your delectable pussy, we have so much to do."

Pouting, I pull on his shoulders until he's sitting up and we're chest to chest.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-Five

He wants babies with me one day.

"Mrs. Conti," I breathe, eyes wide as she heads directly for my desk.

She looks different to how she used to, she's lost weight and her hair, though perfectly kempt, has lost its golden shine.

She smiles at me, it wavers the closer she gets, likely because I'm not smiling back. "Morning, Rose. Is my husband in?"

I shake my head, ignoring her use of the word husband despite how badly I want to correct her. I am an awful person. "He's in a meeting with designers for the new home solar advertisements. He won't be back for…" I check my watch. "Maybe forty minutes or so?"

Her smile fades entirely and her eyes close. "Well, that explains why he hasn't been answering my calls."

"Are you okay?" I ask kindly, hating how tired and down she seems. "Can I get you a coffee?"

"I'd love a coffee," she replies, shocking me because she has always turned me down before. She sits in the seat opposite my desk as I call for an intern to fetch us drinks and cake. In the beginning, I was always too shy to get anybody to do anything for me, but now that I basically run this entire office, I have so many people at my disposal. None of them dare say no because I guess I'm sort of their boss now. I oversee faculty productivity and morale. So far, we are a well-oiled machine.

"How's Maria?" I ask gently, rocking slightly in my chair.

"She's amazing. She keeps asking about you. We haven't seen you in a while."

"After the Pax thing I worried that it wouldn't be safe."

She nods with understanding. "Has he been in touch since he got demoted?"

"Surprisingly he didn't even acknowledge me until this morning." I think back to how he entered the elevator after me and then panicked because he swore he hadn't seen me. I do believe it was a mistake and he just wasn't paying attention because his panic seemed genuine.

Meanwhile I pressed my back to the elevator wall and tried not to visibly tremble. “He was nice… weirdly so… he told me I look nice and that he’s sorry for everything that happened and how he’s been seeing a therapist to work through his issues.”

“Well, that’s good. That hopefully means he’s calming down and won’t terrorize you anymore.”

“Here’s hoping. Then maybe I can start seeing Maria again.”

“You can always visit with her at the house,” she puts in and my heart sinks further. “You went from visiting almost daily to never coming at all.”

“I didn’t realize you’d noticed,” I jest, smiling at the woman whose life I’ve stolen. I feel like such a snake but it’s only a few more days and then she’ll know and there won’t be any more sneaking and lying.

I start tapping to help calm my breathing. It helps.

“Of course I noticed,” she replies with a slight smile. “I’ve been noticing a lot of things these days since my husband asked me for a divorce.”

That gets my heart going. I force myself to keep my eyes on hers.

“What do you mean?”

“Just little things here and there, the way I’ve been treating people,” she admits, not talking about the affair at all so hopefully she doesn’t know about that. “When the love of your life suddenly loses interest in you, you start looking at where you went wrong. I got comfy in my cushy, spoiled lifestyle. I neglected my husband, my child, his family…”

“I’m sure you’re not all to blame,” I mumble, pushing back the guilt I feel. She eyes my hand and frowns. I twist my fingers together instead and smile a reassuring smile that feels more like a grimace.

“Of course not, but I am the majority reason and I’ve accepted that. I just worry that I’ve accepted it too late.” Her eyes fill with tears. I look behind me as she talks, wishing Ezra would exit the elevator right now. “I don’t want to lose my family. I never thought I would and that’s my own fault. I took them for granted.”

“Don’t,” I beg, feeling my own eyes burn. “Please.”

She looks at me, confusion in her eyes. “Sorry, I know we’ve never really spoken, and I feel terrible just suddenly acting like your best friend and offloading on you like it’s my right. My husband is your boss, this isn’t appropriate.”

“No… that’s not… it’s just sad.”

She looks at her phone and watches me tap my fingers on the desk. “I realized that I don’t have many friends either and all of the people who should be good friends are terrible, and all the people who could be amazing friends I tossed away like trash.”

“Time to find some new ones?”

“If only it were that simple.”

The elevator doors ping open and Billy the intern steps out with two coffees and a paper bag.

“Thank you, you are an absolute lifesaver,” I say to him, smiling and handing him a twenty to pay for it. He’s a welcome break from all this emotion.

“I put it on Mr. Conti’s credit,” he replies sheepishly. “Was I not supposed to?”

“That’s fine.” I smile. “I wasn’t sure if you knew the drill. Keep the twenty anyway, put it towards your lunch. My way of saying thank you for being so quick.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He grins and backs away.

“You’re very clever, treat them well and they’ll always prioritize your needs.”

“Exactly.”

I hand her one of the lattes and tip the container of cake out of the paper bag.

“So, tell me what Maria has been up to,” I say to break the silence, offering her a plastic fork for the cake. I’m surprised when she tucks in, humming happily with each bite. I’ve never seen her eat carbs before.

We chat for a while, drinking coffee, sharing jokes, and passing time. She sits while I work, keeping me entertained in a way she never has.

I can’t tell if this is some kind of trick because I’ve never seen her so nice. Ezra told me that she was always fun and good to him in many ways, perhaps this is the side of her that he sees.

It’s making me feel guarded and wary. But then I’m always guarded and wary.

Half an hour later, the elevator doors open, and Ezra exits, laughing at something Miranda said. She steps out after him, laughing too, and both of their eyes drift our way. I ignore the pang of jealousy I feel at him laughing at something Miranda did, what with her being so sexy and open to sexual encounters in the workplace.

Miranda greets us with a happy hello and Ezra looks like he wants to run. His eyes jump between his wife and me. Concern is etched in his features.

“Ladies,” he comments, sounding charismatic and charming as always despite the strained look on his face.

Elizabeth stands and waits for him to get closer. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“I’ve been in a meeting.”

“I know.” She looks so lost and forlorn. I feel like I’m kicking a puppy. “Can we talk?”

“I don’t really have time,” he admits, looking at the watch on his wrist.

“Please,” she begs, her voice a whisper.

He keeps his distance and nods for her to follow. When the door shuts, my heart aches. Every time they must interact, I panic that this will be the time she convinces him to go back.

Then the blinds twitch and open fully and Ezra winks at me through the slightly tinted glass.

I blow out a relieved breath and look at my list for the day. I took too long of a break and now I’ve got to catch up.

I get on with it, trying to take my mind off the fact they’re beyond the glass, talking about things unknown.

My eyes glance over every so often but they remain seated like businessman and client, not like wife and husband.

But then it changes after fifteen minutes, she stands and moves around the desk.

With a rapid heart I lean forward to get a clearer view.

She grabs his tie, but it comes unclipped and falls between them. Then she reaches for him, clasping his face with both hands, but he backs away as he stands, putting the chair between them.

“JUST LET ME TOUCH YOU!” she shrieks suddenly, so loudly I hear her through the glass and door. I see the pain in his eyes.

She buries her face in her hands and her shoulders shake with her sobs. He holds her, pulling her into his chest and I look away. I can’t watch. I give them this. This is personal and I shouldn’t be looking.

She leaves ten minutes later, her eyes swollen, her cheeks shiny with tears.

She doesn’t look at me, too embarrassed by the state she’s in.

I stand when the elevator doors close behind her, and pad to his office.

“You okay?” I ask when I open the door.

“Not now,” he replies, his voice low, his head bowed over his arms on the desk.

“Ez—”

“I said not now!” he yells, his eyes coming to mine, blazing with anger and grief.

Startled, I jump. He hasn’t spoken to me like this in a really long time.

“I don’t think I can do this,” he admits, looking at me with a broken gaze, torn into two by his wife and his mistress. “I don’t think I can do this to her.”

Pain lances through me and I fight back tears. Is this it? Is he going to end it with me now and return to her?

I don’t say anything, I just stand stiff as a board, fighting my pain

and fears one breath at a time.

"Get back to work," he orders, his tone final, my sweet Ezra gone.

"What?"

"I said get back to work. I need space."

"But—"

"You are still under my employ, sleeping together or not. GET BACK TO WORK!" He stands, his hands on the desk, his eyes still angry.

"DON'T SHOUT AT ME!" I yell back, feeling anger take the place of uncertainty and sadness.

"THEN DO YOUR FUCKING JOB!"

"THEN YOU DO YOURS AND STOP DRAGGING ME INTO YOUR SHIT!" I turn and stomp out of his office, slamming the door behind me so hard I'm surprised the surrounding glass didn't break.

Miranda leans against the wall opposite, her brow quirked. "So I shouldn't try to approach him about getting an extra vacation day?"

I shake my head. "Absolutely not."

"Yikes." She starts laughing nervously. "I don't think I've ever heard you yell like that."

"Me neither," I admit sheepishly and sit back in my seat. "He just pushed all the wrong buttons."

"Well… maybe you can sign off on our vacation requests instead?" She's smirking, and normally a request like that I'd take to the boss, but fuck it. "I booked the wrong date is all."

"So long as you have appropriate cover it shouldn't be a problem," I reply, because I'm probably going to have to leave soon anyway.

She punches the air and hands me the sheet of paper. I look it over, triple-check it, sign it, stamp it, and slide it back to her.

"Thank you very much." She saunters away and I close my laptop and pack up for the day. I can finish this at home.

"A word?" Ezra asks, popping his head around the door.

"I've got quite a few of those for you," I reply, glaring at my bag as I zip it closed.

"Now, Rose," he orders but I keep packing my bag. He grabs it from my desk and storms into his office.

I can do nothing but follow. He has my keys.

"What, Mr. Conti? What do you need?"

"I haven't given you permission to leave."

"You broke up with me, I don't need permission," I respond petulantly, folding my arms and tapping my foot on the ground.

He blinks at me, his gray eyes glowing with annoyance and bitterness. "You know what? I just don't have the emotional capacity to baby you today."

"Baby me?" I breathe, fighting the urge to laugh and scream at the

same time. “When have you ever had to baby me?”

“Constantly. I constantly have to reassure you that things are going to be okay.”

He does not! “That is extremely unfair.”

“I have handed you everything… absolutely fucking everything… you’d think the least you can do is give me space to deal with my shit when it’s getting to me.”

“I didn’t impose on you, I just asked if you were okay. I didn’t even say anything!” My hands are clenched into fists by my side. “You’re the one who started saying you don’t think you can do this to her. Am I not supposed to wonder what the heck that means?”

“You saw her!” he says, dumping my bag on the couch. “You saw how distressed she was. A woman I love and care about. And then you come in here, trying to console me, the woman I’m breaking her heart for.”

“You said you didn’t leave her for me.”

“It’s not that black and white and you know it. You’ll always be part of the reason.”

I knew it. I knew it would come to this eventually, I just didn’t imagine it would be so soon. “So you’re saying if I broke up with you right now you’d go back to her?”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

I look at him incredulously. “Should I? Is this what it’s going to be like every time she comes crying?”

“Probably. And it’s the least I fucking deserve, seeing a woman I love sob on her knees and beg me to return to her, turning her down because I don’t want to hurt you, the woman I love the most. Living with my own guilt that I dared to fall for somebody else while married to my *wife*. Not getting to see my daughter every day…”

“You asked me to stay,” I breathe, feeling my heart break. “I was going to leave. I never wanted that for you, or her, or Maria.”

“And we’re both paying for it.”

I don’t cry, I click the pen in my hand and reach for my bag. When I hook it over my shoulder, he doesn’t try and stop me. “I’m going to go home and leave you to make your decision about what you want and who you want. If you don’t come home, I’ll take that as you choosing your wife and I’ll never speak of this affair again.”

My voice is firm, a contrast to how broken I feel inside.

“But let this be the last time you have doubts because if you choose to leave me again, I won’t come back if you change your mind.”

“I’m not conflicted, damn it,” he snarls, spinning me so my back presses against the door. “I want you! I just hate how badly I’m hurting everyone else. Do you get that?”

“Of course I get that, but you need to get over it and move on because it’s going to tear us apart.”

I empathize with him. Of course I do. But if he’s made his decision he needs to settle on that decision.

“Nothing is going to tear us apart,” he whispers, pressing his forehead to mine. “Nothing.”

“You say that and then in a few days when you tell her that you’re moving on, you come to me with more scratches and guilt and decide to leave me.”

“I’m not leaving you,” he insists and then crushes his lips to mine. “I’m happy. You make me so fucking happy. But sometimes in my grief and guilt I forget that. I forget how badly I wanted you. How much I craved you. I’m not letting you go. Not a chance. Not for all the money in the world.”

“You love her too.”

“I do, but I don’t *need* her like I need you.”

I grip his cock between us and his eyes flare. “Show me how much you need me,” I breathe against his lips.

He dips, shoves my skirt up to my waist, lifts my thigh and with a bit of tugging he pulls his cock free and slams home making me cry out from the force.

“I want you forever. I want to fuck you every single day. I want to taste your sweet lips. I want to fill your womb with my seed and create a life tied to both of us.” He thrusts with each statement, grinding his pelvis against my clit, kissing my neck and whispers the words against my skin. “You’re everything I ever want and need.”

“I love you,” I breathe. “I want to be the only woman you ever need.”

“You are.”

“Then fuck me, prove it, mark me.” I bite into his neck and suck so hard I just know there’s going to be a ring of red there when I lift my head. He cries out and pummels me with his hips, fucking me so furiously the door bangs with each thrust.

We come together, clinging to each other as our orgasms spiral into one. His cock pulses, my pussy clenches, our breathing is haggard, and our hearts are synchronized.

“We need to stop fighting over this,” he mumbles, “I don’t want to fight with you. What can I do to reassure you that you’re all I want?”

“You can’t, not until your divorce is final and we’re open with the world. Until then I’m going to panic every day that it’s my last day with you.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-Six

His pain… he's not afraid to feel it.

"I'd love to stay and chat," I say, my tone deep and manly as I hold a lock of my hair across my upper lip. "But I really *mustache*."

Ezra throws his head back with laughter and yanks my hair from my fingers. His eyes sparkle with amusement when they search my face. "You're in such a good mood."

I skip around him like a happy little lamb and throw a box of Lucky Charms into the shopping cart. I pick up a second box and point to the words in the middle. "One could say you can't resist my charms."

He chuckles and takes that box off me, only to put that one in the cart with the rest of the food.

His arm snakes around my shoulders and he pulls my head to his lips which soften against my temple.

We're just getting a few things, enough to last us until we leave on our vacation in six days. My lucky number.

We head directly to the fresh produce where he baulks over the quality of some of the veg. He picks up a healthy-looking carrot after digging through some not so healthy ones.

"Oh look, honey," I declare loudly, picking up a sprouting potato. "The potatoes are *rooting* for us."

He groans dramatically and throws the carrot he was holding at my chest.

Giggling, I catch it, toss it into the cart and stand on the end like a child, making him push me. I hold his eyes, a smile tightening my cheeks. He's so handsome with his gray eyes, chiseled jaw, thick, tame brows, a nose with a slight crook in it that one wouldn't notice if they hadn't spent hours examining his features like I have.

"You're such a child," he comments but he's joking, he loves it when I get giddy like this which these days is more and more often.

"Bitch, peas," I say, grabbing a bag of the tiny green vegetables as we pass. "I'm…" Damn it. I can't think of anything. I spy strawberries and cringe as I say, "Strawesome?"

“That was terrible.”

“I don’t see you doing any better.”

He reaches into the cart. “You’re a real *pizza* work.” I look at the pepperoni pizza in his hand and jump off the cart end, then I round it and throw myself at him, pressing my lips to his while giggling. “What did I say?”

“You’re just…” I lean back and bite my lip, beaming so brightly my entire face aches. “I just love you. Promise me we’ll always be this happy. We won’t become cranky and obsessed with making life hell.”

“I promise,” he replies, smiling just as fondly.

“Good.” I take the cart and push it ahead, passing a stack of promotional alcohol as we head to the checkout. “Life without you would be unbearable.”

He slaps my ass so hard it echoes and stings. I almost scream but instead just throw a carrot at his head while rubbing my sore rear with my other hand.

“I’ll kiss it better for you later,” he whispers in my ear and nips the lobe.

When his phone starts to ring, I take control of the cart again and watch him answer it out of the corner of my eye.

“Talk to me.” His smile falters. “Is it about Maria? Then no… I said no, Elizabeth—” I join a line of people waiting to be served and start placing our shopping on the conveyer belt. “No. We will talk at the hearing. Other than that, you can’t keep doing this… because it’s over that’s why. I’m hanging up now.” He tucks his phone away, stares at it for a beat, closes his eyes, inhales, I wait for him to count to six and then he smiles at me. “Where were we?”

I throw myself at him again, kissing his face, his lips, his nose… just everything.

He deepens it, pushing his tongue into my mouth, dancing it across my own in a more than pleasant way. We don’t separate until somebody clears their throat.

“Oops,” I murmur, feeling my cheeks heat.

He chuckles into my neck and we move along, placing our purchases into paper bags.

I’m not sure I could be any happier than I am right now. Well… I guess I could be when everything calms down and I make friends with his family again.

Speaking of his family, I did send Izabella a text telling her how sorry I am, but she never replied. I didn’t expect her to. This is going to be a difficult process, but I know when they see how much love Ezra and I share they’ll understand why we did what we did.

We head home with our groceries in the trunk, holding hands over the console like teen lovers. He listens to me chat animatedly about

work and Laurie and whatever else jumps to mind, a gentle smile on his face the entire time.

Back in the apartment we put our shopping away side by side, and when done he lifts me by my hips onto the counter and we share a slice of delicious carrot cake. He feeds me it, giving himself a bite and then me and I wonder how I ever got so lucky.

"I forgot to tell you that Kylie dropped off some garment bags this morning, I hung them up in your side of the closet."

His eyes light up. "Those are for you, not me. For our getaway."

"Bikinis?" I question, smirking at the devilish look on his face. He nods yes and slides his hands up my thighs. "I love how much you love to look at my body."

"You're perfection, my own, real, personal adult magazine. I used to have women who look like you plastered over my bedroom walls as a teen." He sucks on my lower lip. "Every night I'd fantasize about pushing my cock into them as their heels dug into my ass."

"Is that why you like it when I wear heels?"

"That and the way your thighs look." He dips his head and sucks on my neck, swirling his tongue around the mark there. His fingers drag up the grooves of my thighs, the muscles that I've gained from how much walking I do and how often I hit the gym in our flashy new apartment building.

I groan and then giggle when he starts pinching and squeezing.

Soon I'm finding it hard to breathe as he tortures me with his prodding fingertips.

Then he stops, leaving me panting and tingly. "Don't tickle me."

"But your snorting is so adorable." He kisses the tip of my nose and picks up the cake. "As much as I'd like to ravish you again, I know you're hungry. You need more sustenance than cake."

"Sausage?" I question, grasping his hard cock through his jeans.

Growling, he yanks me off the side and deposits me on the tiled floor. "Behave."

"I don't want to. We can eat later."

He laughs as I assault him, trying to push my hand into his pants. I only stop when he pins me up against the fridge, his chest against mine. "I don't know what you see in me, a man with thirteen years on you—"

"And a half."

He narrows his eyes on me and pinches my nose between his fingers. "But I'm grateful all the same… Little shit."

"I'm keeping you," I tell him firmly. "I'm never letting you go."

"I'm not going anywhere."

“Stop it,” Laurie admonishes, slapping my hands which are beating the table to music in my head. “Relax, will you?”

“I can’t. It’s too intense. I need to know what’s happening.”

Ezra went to his hearing five hours ago and he’s telling his wife about us after. The hearing should have only taken an hour or two… the rest will obviously take some time too.

Five hours is just too much.

Laurie has to leave soon and she’s failing at distracting me.

I’ve packed and unpacked my suitcase a dozen times too. Ezra and I don’t leave until the morning after tomorrow, but I like to be prepared.

I’ve run out of things to keep me busy. It has been such a rough few days since our argument and then this, but things between Ezra and me have been amazing otherwise. We’re both excited to go away and put this all behind us.

Ezra: I’ll be there in five.

I look at my phone and then grab Laurie by her shoulders. “You’ve gotta go.”

“He’s on his way?”

I nod eagerly, excitedly. That massive weight is finally lifting from my shoulders. We can be open now. He can slowly bring Maria around to the idea and the rest of his family. In a few weeks they’ll be divorced, and we can pull the goalie, start the family I’ve always wanted and live happily ever after.

“Love you,” she says, grinning and hugging me. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

I watch her go, knowing she’s not upset by my dismissal of her. She’s got things to do anyway.

Then I pace, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth…

I don’t know how much time passes but it feels like way too long before the door opens and keys hit the dish by the door.

I run at him, hitting his body full force, wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist.

He grips me tight. Too tight. His face goes to my neck and his arms hold me so strong I feel like I’m about to break.

“Can’t breathe,” I jest, pulling back to look at him but startling with alarm when I see his eyes. They’re swollen. He’s been crying. “What is it? Are you okay?”

He slants his lips over mine, his body trembling. This is weird but I go with it. Maybe he’s just upset that his divorce will be final soon. It can’t be easy for him, he spent over a decade with this woman, she

gave him a child. They've got a bond that I try to understand.

I rub his scalp with the tips of my fingers as he carries me to the bedroom and deposits me on the bed. His hands grasp and grope every part of me that he can reach. He devours my lips, my jaw, my neck, my shoulders, my breasts. Meanwhile I writhe beneath him, clinging to him and exploring the solid muscles of his body.

He groans, I moan, we pant, no words are spoken. We free our bodies of the cloth that keeps us parted and rejoin. He sinks into me, thrusting roughly. I gasp, my lips part and my legs wrap around his thighs, holding him to me as tightly as physically possible.

When my orgasm hits me, it rolls in gentle, pulsing waves, making my body jerk and spasm. He follows with a choked, staggered cry, and he buries his face in my neck, nuzzling me as his hips press so hard against mine, I can hardly move.

When I feel his tears against my skin, I hold him tighter. I don't say a word, I'm too scared to ask why he's so upset. His body trembles against mine and he rolls us onto our sides, burying his face in my chest and clinging to me like I'm his last breath.

"Please, you're breaking me," I say, repeating the words he spoke to me the last time I cried. "It's going to be okay. You'll see."

He starts thrusting again, my thigh over his hip as he pushes harder, not that he can get any more inside, he's already into the hilt. I feel so full and wanted. He doesn't look at me, just holds me as he rocks us both to another orgasm.

I don't know what's going on, I don't know why, but I know that he needs this closeness, that he needs me.

"I love you," he whispers in my ear, his body covering my own. "I love you so fucking much."

"I love you too," I reply.

He sits up and flips me onto my stomach so he can rub every inch of my body with his hands.

I hum happily, burying my face in the soft pillow that smells clean and fresh. I feel so relaxed and happy as he digs his fingers and palms in.

My tired body gives in and I find myself drifting to sleep.

He kisses my neck and shoulder and doesn't stop rubbing me until I fall over the edge of slumber and sink into a dreamland full of happy thoughts and a hopeful future.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I forever amuse him.

When I woke up around two minutes ago, the last thing I expected to find was an empty apartment. Ezra always wakes me before he leaves, that's if he leaves before me which isn't exactly often. In fact, from memory it has been three times.

A feeling of dread sinks in as I call out his name from the bedroom and get no answer.

I clamber to my feet, getting tangled in the duvet. Reaching for my gown, I stumble a little and right myself, praying he appears in the doorway with mussed hair and a handsome smile.

"EZRA?" I call for the fifth time, checking the bathroom and then looking around for some clue as to where he could be. His power cord is still there but he has fifty of the things so that's not much of a tell.

I pick up my phone but have received no messages or calls.

"Babe?" I call again, padding into the dark hall, it's only three in the morning. I baulk at the time, I thought it was later than that. We have blackout blinds, so I often wake in the dark feeling disoriented.

Where is he?

I shout for him again and check the spare room and his office. His laptop is gone. His briefcase has also gone.

His favorite shoes are gone.

He's gone.

I try to rationalize it, but I can't. He wouldn't have gone anywhere without letting me know first. And after last night I just know that something isn't right here. The way he cried, the way he held me… was he saying goodbye?

I hiccup, fighting the urge to sob.

I'm jumping to conclusions.

I find his name in my contacts and get ready to call him, begging silently that he answers. Meanwhile I take another look around the apartment. I don't want to seem overbearing and I'm also terrified of what he'll say if he does answer.

Then I see something resting on his pillow, something I didn't see

in the dark. It's a note. My heart soars. There it is, his explanation. I bet there was an emergency and he had to go and just didn't want to disturb my slumber.

I unfold it… I read it… I crumple it with a choked sob in a tight fist.

I'm a coward, I couldn't look into your eyes while I broke both of our hearts.

I love you. I am so sorry.

Ezra.

I remain in a catatonic state, feeling my brain cells burst with pain. I resist the urge to pass out while fighting the urge to vomit.

He's just got cold feet. That's all it is.

I'm a risk, not a guarantee… his wife is a guarantee. *That's all it is.*

I'm starting to feel hysterical.

I call his phone again and receive a robotic voice, "The number you have dialed is no longer in service."

My hands are shaking so wretchedly the phone falls from my hands. No. This isn't right. He wouldn't do this. He promised.

HE PROMISED!

He wouldn't just make love to me and leave me.

He wouldn't leave me a note knowing I'll never be able to erase it from memory. I can even count the lines on the paper, there are thirty-six of them, a multiple of six, a cruel joke to go with his abandonment.

Story of my life.

I send him a text, knowing he won't get it, begging him to call me.

Then I pace, and click my fingers, unable to stop as my heart thuds so painfully I worry it might burst with each throb.

My feet ache, my thighs throb, the skin on my fingers blister as I fight to snap out of my compulsion. In the end I scream and collapse onto my knees, trying to breathe through the pain. I trusted him. I was so sure.

My alarm sounds, it's seven, I'm supposed to be at work.

Should I go? Will he be there?

I have to go.

I shower twice, I dress and undress and then dress again. I do my makeup but then wipe it off because I just can't with that today.

Then I head to work, taking Ezra's car that he loaned to me, wondering how long until he kicks me out of this apartment that I've made home.

He needs to give me more than just a note.

To say I'm quick on my feet would be an understatement. I get to our floor knowing he won't be here because his car wasn't in his spot. I push open the door anyway and almost sink to my knees when I see the man he hired as his fill-in in his seat, on the phone.

"Miss Sinclair," he says, smiling gently. His eyes hold a sadness to them that has me on edge. "You're early."

"Where is he?"

"Mr. Conti has decided to take his annual leave early." He picks up an envelope and holds it out. "He also asked me to ensure you get this."

As I'm reaching for it my phone vibrates. It's Laurie. I reject the call. I don't have time right now.

"What is it?" I ask, weighing the manila envelope in my hands.

"Your severance packet."

"My what?" I gasp, letting my lips part. My heart just burst, shooting sharp fragments through my veins.

"He is terminating your contract, effective immediately."

"WHAT?" I yell, ripping a hand through my hair, forgetting about my neat bun. "He's firing me? Do you have his contact number?"

"I was informed not to give it to you."

"Well, then I suggest you fucking call him yourself and say I am not being fired. I will sue for unfair dismissal."

He hesitates, looking me up and down, measuring whether I'm a worthy opponent. Oh I am. If Ezra thinks he can get rid of me this easily he has another thing coming.

I just need to speak to him.

He picks up the phone and I watch him dial while burning the number to memory.

His eyes linger on me, brown and uncomfortable. I bet he wishes he never took this job.

"Mr. Conti?" he asks, still watching me as though I'm ready to strike. "She's here…" There's a pause. "She's refusing to accept it, claiming she will claim unfair dismissal and sue." There's another pause. "I will tell her, sir." He hangs up the phone and looks at my bag. "He's going to call you now."

Thank God. Maybe I can convince him.

My phone vibrates. I grasp it and put it to my ear.

"Can you give me the office?" I ask and he moves to the door, taking his coffee with him.

"Hey," Ezra breathes, sounding… different.

"What the hell, Ezra?" I choke, clicking my sore fingers and pacing back and forth. "You're just dumping and firing me? What did I do?"

"Nothing," he implores, his tone stronger than before, "you did nothing. I swear. You're perfect in every way."

“Then why have you done this? Have you gone back to her? Is that… I just… I’m so confused.” Tears burn trails down my cheeks.

“I had hoped you’d be so mad at me just vanishing you wouldn’t want to talk, and you’d just leave without needing to know.”

Is he insane? “What? Needing to know what?”

He lets out a staggered breath. “Just take the severance money, exit with your shining reference, and find happiness.”

“You make me happy,” I whisper, letting out a sob. “I love you. I want you. I don’t want anybody else. What happened to starting a family and being together? We were so close…”

“I know,” he breathes, sounding as devastated as I am. “I know.”

“Please,” I beg, “don’t do this to me. To us.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Is it Maria? Did you not get joint custody? Because we can wait. I’ll wait. There’s no rush for us to be together. We can—”

“She’s pregnant.”

If there were ever words spoken that could tear my world apart, those would be the ones.

“Ezra,” I say, heartbroken at the sound of his anguish.

“She’s pregnant,” he repeats, sounding angry and desperate for something though I don’t know what.

I’m going to vomit. I know what he’s saying. I know who he’s saying it about, but I ask anyway. “Who?”

I guess I just need clarity. I just need to hear it exactly from him.

He throws something and it shatters like my heart did this morning. “Elizabeth.”

Sitting because I feel too weak to stand, I ask, “It’s yours?”

“Apparently so.”

“How can you be so sure? You said you didn’t sleep with her for two weeks before you broke up.” I’m shaking my head, my lips are parted, I just can’t believe this is happening. I don’t want to believe it.

He sounds so anguished and broken, like he doesn’t want this. “She’s three months pregnant. She didn’t want to tell me because she didn’t want it to be the only reason I went back to her.”

So much pain. I can’t handle this amount of pain.

“No,” I breathe, shaking my head and pressing my hand to my chest. “No. No. No. You… you begged me to stay. You told me to stay. You… you convinced me. I stayed. I gave it all up for you.”

This is my karma. I knew it was too perfect. I knew the fates would conspire against us in the end.

“Are you going back to her?”

His words are clipped, bitten out. I don’t know if he’s mad at me or just the situation in general, but it hurts that he’s taking this tone with me when I’m the one he has broken. “She is pregnant, what would

you have me do?"

"Be a father and not her husband."

"I would miss everything."

I understand his need to be there for his unborn child, but I just can't stomach this. I can't lose him. I'm selfish but I love him so much. I can't comprehend this.

"Does she know about us?"

He pauses and sniffs. "She knows I've been sleeping with somebody, but she doesn't know who."

"And she's willing to take you back?"

"She's pregnant," he answers quietly. "She's willing to overlook it with some therapy."

I raise a trembling hand to my lips as my mind fully works over this that's happening. I feel achy and shaky and sick. "Did you know she was pregnant when you had sex with me last night? Did you already know you were leaving me?" He doesn't answer. The coward doesn't reply. "ANSWER ME!"

"I don't want to lose you."

"But you are. You're leaving me, aren't you?"

More silence… and then he changes the topic entirely. "You can keep the apartment for as long as you need."

"Oh my God," I breathe harshly, feeling my chest constrict and my throat close. "You knew. This wasn't some last-minute decision. You took me to bed and you FUCKING KNEW you were going to hurt me like this."

"I told you, I couldn't do this to your face."

"You coward. You God damn mother fucking coward," I spit, clenching my free hand into a fist. My nails bite deep into my palm. "You *fuck*! How could you? You don't think I deserve more than this?"

"You deserve the world."

"YOU JUST TOOK IT FROM ME!"

"I didn't want that. I never want to hurt you."

Even in my anger and sorrow I still don't want him to leave me. I'm a mess of conflicting emotions. "Don't do this. Please… Ezra. I can't… I don't want this without you. What about the getaway? What about pulling the goalie?"

"She's pregnant," he repeats sadly. "She's having my baby. I can't… *we* can't do this anymore. It's over. It has to be. I have to let you go."

I'm breaking. I have never felt such a final pain like this. I've never felt loss like this.

She has taken back what was hers that I made mine.

"I beg you," I whisper, gripping the edge of his desk, wondering if this is how she felt when he left her. This man collecting his jar of

fucking hearts like they're nothing more than pebbles and then casting them into the sea. "Don't leave me. I love you. You made me love you. You make me feel better. I don't have as many episodes when I'm with you. I hardly count. Without you I'll regress. I need you. Please."

He sticks that knife in deeper and twists. "This isn't about you and me anymore. It can't be." He inhales a staggered breath. "This is killing me too."

"Fuck you," I spit. "Killing *you*? You were just waiting for something like this as an excuse to go running back to her."

"That's not true!"

"Of course it is. You've got it all now. You'll forget about me by Monday. Whereas I'll be alone. I'll have nobody."

"Don't say that. I can't hear it. What would you have me do?"

"CHOOSE ME!" I scream, feeling tears gush down my cheeks like waterfalls. "Choose me. Please. Choose me. Not her. You can still be a father. I'll help you. I'm willing to be there, for you for this new baby, for Maria. We can all get along and be what they need. Just choose me."

"You're not thinking clearly; you're letting your grief guide you. In a few months when that baby is born, you'll wish it was yours, or you'll resent it for taking me away from you, you'll resent me for putting you in this position. This isn't a choice between you and my wife anymore. This is the choice between you and my kids. I have to choose my kids."

"Please…"

"I am so sorry that you're the one hurt by this. So sorry."

"I'll never forgive you for this. I will *never* come back to you," I hiss.

"I know and it kills me, but I have to do what's right for my family."

"I'm your family too."

"You will always hold such a large part of my heart and my soul will always be yours."

Before I can say another word, the line goes dead. Like my soul, the part of me that will always be his.

I bury my face in my arms and cry. This hurts. It's like physical pain. Searing, burning, aching, clenching pain that I can't shake.

How can he just throw me away as though I'm nothing?

When my phone rings again I fight the urge to smash it but when I see that it's Laurie, I answer it and sob so hard none of my words make sense. Yet she hears me anyway.

"I'm coming to get you," she says simply, "you'll always have me. Always. You don't need him."

I do though. I love Laurie more than the world. But I love Ezra

more than myself.

When she disconnects the call, I sit in his office, tapping my fingers against the screen of my phone. I get up to one hundred and eighty-six because thirty-one multiplied by six. But then thirty-one isn't a multiple of six so I tap up to two hundred and fifty-two because forty-two sixes.

My brain hurts, my fingers ache, my chest feels like an empty void. I can imagine him sitting with his wife and Maria, his hand on her belly, laughing and joking and sharing love and everything he promised me.

But I knew this would happen because he promised it to her first.

I had no right to claim it. To claim him. His promises meant nothing. I should have known that from the second he made them.

Leaning back, I stare up at the ceiling feeling a deep bitterness that I have never felt before. The pain is so unbearable I even consider throwing myself from the roof. Wanting to see his reaction from the other world. Wanting to hurt him as badly as I'm hurting. How weak does that make me? How deluded? Yet I feel it anyway.

But who can blame me for feeling so empty? What do I have really? Laurie, who is moving on with her own life… and the lost promises of a family I've always wanted.

I was fine before him, so why do I feel so empty and hollow without him now? Why do I feel as though I simply can't function without him crawling into my bed each night?

And then I remember that for the past six months I can confidently say he has been my best friend and losing him is derailing my life in a way I was never prepared for. I don't like change and suddenly I'm in the midst of it in a really bad way.

I leave Ezra's office while clutching the envelope in a tight grasp.

Laurie and I meet in the middle between her apartment and the office, though it must be said I probably shouldn't be driving in my current state.

She hugs me immediately, holding me tighter than she ever has in the middle of the street in front of everybody.

"What am I going to do?" I whisper, pained and broken.

She pulls back and while trying to wipe away my tears, she slaps me around the face and then yanks her own hair.

I laugh but the happy feeling vanishes faster than it came.

"First we're going on this all-expenses paid vacation that you booked for yourself." Because apparently Ezra changed his ticket to her name. That's how certain he was that we are ending. "And we're going to have the time of our lives. SEX ON THE COCKTAIL GLASS!"

"Minus the last part."

"And then we're going to come back and you're going to do one of

two things. One…" She clicks her fingers and goes to slap me again. I grab her wrist but otherwise we don't acknowledge it. I know really she wants to slap Ezra. "We're going to find you a new job and get you as far away from him as possible. Two… we're going to stay; keep the job you have and make him see everything he's missing."

"His wife is pregnant."

"One… how do we even know it's his? Two… so what?"

I level her with a look. "I have morals. She doesn't deserve this."

"Again… so what? That's your man. He loves *you*. Win him back or move on. Or make his life hell for hurting you. Either one is good. I like the latter. Can we do the latter? DICK IN A BLENDER!"

"I definitely vote that last one," I mutter, trying to joke but it falls flat when my lips quiver.

"Aren't you mad? He promised you the fucking world."

"I'm so hurt I don't have space for much else."

She links her arm through mine and guides me to my car. "Drive us home so I can pack, and we can vacation this funk right out of you. We don't need men to be happy. We don't need to be normal to be happy. You just have to remember that."

When I burst into more tears, she hugs me again, and then slaps me. But this time I think it was on purpose.

Going on vacation with your best friend immediately after a breakup is probably the best thing you can do. The first two days hurt like hell, but after that we got so drunk, I was all, *"Ezra who?"* Well… for the most part. If I saw anybody kissing or acting all loved up it made me feel irrationally angry and extremely sad.

To say I started sobbing at random times would be an understatement. I'm a weak fool, but I'm in love. Or I was, now I'm just *in anger*.

And Laurie has talked me into keeping hold of that anger. She thinks I should get revenge; she thinks I should make his life hell. Perhaps she's right.

I can find another job, but in the meantime, I'm going to make him see what he let go. I think at this point the only thing that will help me move on is hurting him as much as he has hurt me. Reeling him back in and doing something to him so horrific he cries as much as I have.

He can't fire me. He has no grounds to fire me on.

Maybe I'm being petty, maybe I should just move on, but I don't want to make it that easy on him.

I'm starting to see now that maybe he's not as good as I thought he

was. He's a snake, going behind his wife's back and having unprotected sex with me. Lying to her while planning a future with me.

Robert was right when he said Mr. Conti's place was at home with his wife. He had no business making me fall in love with him when he was already taken, just to destroy me in the end.

No…

I'm not this person. I'm not about to ruin a man. I'm not about to become Pax because he hurt me.

Fuck Ezra. Fuck him, fuck his wife, fuck… fuck… fuck.

"Have you decided yet?" Laurie asks as we fly home, both of us tan, both of us glowing. "You look resolute all of a sudden, like a woman on a mission."

"I'm moving," I say softly. "Fuck Ezra."

"I love it when you swear."

"I don't like it, it tastes weird."

"Words don't have flavors."

I grin at my friend, ignoring the tingling ache in my chest that reminds me constantly of what I just lost.

Through my smile I allow myself to cry one last time, each tear shelters the broken pieces of my heart.

"You'll get through this."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-Eight

He's set in my soul.

I decided to take the severance packet which was way more money than what any other employee would get. It felt dirty depositing that check into my bank. It made me feel like a prostitute, but Laurie quickly talked me out of that one.

She was right in saying, when I moved to Seattle, I'd need a car and enough money to get my own place.

Robert Butler has saved my ass. He got me the job I was promised before with the same benefits and apartment. I started Monday and I adore my new boss. He is the sweetest, old, Japanese guy I have ever met in my life. And he has the hottest grandson in the world who visited from New York the day I arrived.

I am now officially the proud office manager and PA to Mr. Watanabe's firm. Nowhere near as large as WhyTech but wealthy enough to have several branches across the States. They have their hands in every law pool there is. From domestic, to criminal.

Mr. Watanabe is the greatest criminal defense attorney in the country, his shining winning record is proof of that. Though he's extremely expensive because of it and has very rich clientele and ties to important people all over the world.

"How have you enjoyed your first week?" he asks me, his almond eyes shining with genuine happiness beneath white and black brows.

"I should be asking you how I did this week, I made a couple of silly errors on Thursday that I'm not happy about and I'm sure you're not either."

He flaps a hand at me. "Tiny errors that we corrected. I expected more your first week. So far I'm impressed. I have high hopes that you'll continue to impress me too."

"That's so kind of you." I tuck my hair behind my ears. "And I appreciate the opportunity."

"You haven't answered my question. Are you happy here?"

"Of course, I've got a great apartment, I'm visiting a friend tonight, my boss is very kind, the office has taken well to my position here so

far…"

"Yet you look so sad." He rests his chin on his raised fist as he assesses me.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, it hasn't affected your work at all from what I can tell. I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I will be," I assure him, putting on a fake but bright smile. "I just miss what I left behind."

"It's a big change, if I can help in any way, you let me know."

"Thank you, Mr. Watanabe."

He smiles and I dismiss myself, standing and moving to my own office which adjoins his. It is so nice having my own private space where people have to knock to get the okay to bug me, as opposed to WhyTech where I had to acknowledge everybody even when I didn't have time.

Robert: I'll be outside in ten.

I smile at my phone.

Rose: Promise? I'm so hungry.

Robert: In the mood for sausage?

Rose: Gross.

Robert: What's wrong with sausage?

Rose: I love sausage. Just not the sausage you're offering.

Robert: You filthy-minded whorebag. I was talking about Sausage Palace about twenty minutes away.

Rose: Suuuuure you were.

Half an hour later we pull up outside of Sausage Palace that do hot dogs and shakes of all kinds.

"Oh," I mutter looking up at the ostentatious building with a giant sausage-shaped light above the door. "You weren't kidding."

Grinning at me, he takes my hand and swings it between us, whistling happily as we go. I look at his profile, wishing I'd met and fallen for him first, though my heart probably wouldn't have fared any better. He's a massive playboy. He loves women. Though he insists it's

just until the right one comes along, to which I explained his philandering ways would likely scare her away, he replied, “The right girl for me will look past my past and focus on my future.”

There’s no way I could argue with that.

We enter the family-friendly restaurant complete with play area and screaming kids. Only Robert would love the food at a place like this.

“So… you know I have that party coming up in a few weeks?”

I cringe. “How could I forget? Is *he* attending?”

Robert knows the truth about my affair with Ezra and has been a shoulder for me since I moved to Seattle two weeks ago.

The day Laurie and I got back from our romantic vacation to Hawaii, we packed up my shit and I moved back to her place for a while. Just while Robert helped me find a job, luckily for me Mr. Watanabe wasn’t happy with his newest company addition and here I am now. She didn’t even finish her trial period of two weeks before I stepped in.

I don’t want to be happy about somebody else’s failure, but with how easy I’m adapting to this job, it feels like it was always meant to be mine. The people I work with are incredibly nice and welcoming. I’ve already started to make friends which is something I never accomplished at WhyTech. Everybody was in a clique.

“He RSVP’d. Truth be told I think he’s hoping to catch a glimpse of you.”

“Seriously? Why?”

“He misses you. I told him we were still in touch and you might be there, though I didn’t tell him you are living here.”

I pull a face as we sit at a table furthest away from the kids, and a woman, donning a hat that looks like fries, comes over to take our drink order. We both opt for soda, though with this level of noise I should have chosen vodka.

He winks at me. “Still hate him?”

“Yep.”

“He hurt you, but he wants to talk.”

“And?”

He chuckles and slides a menu my way. “Stubborn.”

Truth be told I want to talk to him too. I want to scream at him and ask him why he didn’t choose me. But what’s the point? She’s pregnant.

“I don’t want anything to do with him anymore.”

“Will you still go to my party?”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you trying to get me in his path.”

“Eh, no, I definitely don’t want you both continuing your affair… but what better way is there to get him to stop calling you and

bugging me about you?" He wags his brows which are a shade or two darker than his hair.

"How will me seeing him stop him from bugging me?"

"Because when he sees how disinterested you are—"

"Sounds like a game to me."

"He'll give up trying."

I blink at him and smile enthusiastically. "I suppose. I could take a date."

"Let's not be hasty."

"I'll see if Mr. Watanabe's grandson is in the area."

"Hey now… no need to jump to—"

I grin wryly. "Might even get laid. He's gorgeous, have you met him?"

Now his eyes are narrowed, his jealousy evident. It's no secret that Robert is attracted to me and no secret that I'm attracted to him, even though we've never acted upon it. "I don't like you at all right now."

"I can hardly go with you, Robert. One, you're one of Cunti's—"

"HA… Cunti."

"—*closest* friends. And two, you're my only real friend local. I don't want to mess that up. I appreciate what we have too much." I tap my fingers on the table six times. "Not to mention the fact I'm still in love with him."

"But would you go running back to him if he offered?"

That's a question I've asked myself many times. "His wife is pregnant."

"What if she wasn't pregnant?"

My hands wrap around the drink the waitress brings over before taking our food orders.

When she's gone, I continue, "He didn't choose me."

"He chose his baby."

"No, he chose her."

He looks confused. "Would you not have chosen your child?"

"Absolutely, but… Ezra and I were planning to get pregnant as soon as his divorce was final."

He chokes on his soda and hits his chest with his fist. "W… what?"

"He even told me to come off birth control, but I said not while he's married."

With thick, parted lips he emits a gasp. "This is starting to sound more and more like midlife crisis the more I hear of it."

"Shut up," I murmur and shrug my shoulders. "Whatever it was to him it was real to me. So I was excited and ready to take the next step with him. What if I'd come off birth control before they divorced and I was already pregnant?"

"Are you?"

“No, of course not. I get the injection every three months, but so off topic. What would he have done then? Who would he have chosen?” I look at Robert with sad eyes. “Would he have chosen me?”

“I think he’s an ass, whatever his choice. He never should have started anything with you.”

“Agreed, so no, I wouldn’t go back. I deserve better than him and Pax.”

“You sure do.” He grins flashing his perfect teeth.

“Did I tell you that he didn’t even tell me to my face?”

“You did but you can tell me again.”

“He said goodbye in a note… *a note*, after we had sex… and then he fired me, not even a goodbye to my face. *Who does that?*”

“Only assholes like Cunti.”

I grunt my agreement. “Anyway, stop talking about it. It’s making me angry.”

“Noted,” he mutters, his smile still in place. He just finds it so easy to smile all the time. It’s endearing.

Our food arrives in record time and I lick my lips at the sight of my jumbo chili dog with cheese and fried onions.

“I can’t believe you got tater tots,” I say, giggling when he dips one in way too much ketchup like a little boy and chews it with a groan. I pick up my ordinary fry and eye it before dunking it in mustard.

“Open,” he calls as I swallow the fry. Not bad food considering there’s likely no real chef here.

“Why?”

“Just open.”

I part my lips and tilt my head back, jumping slightly when a tater tot hits my cheek. I catch it with my hand by sheer luck, dip it in ketchup and eat it. “You missed. Try again.”

He chuckles, and this time, when he throws it, I’m ready. I catch it on my tongue.

“Once more.”

“You just want to eat my tots.”

Giggling, I pick up a fry, break it in half for throwing ease and declare, “My turn.”

He opens his mouth and I toss it gently. It bounces off his nose, so I try again. He gets it this time.

I bite into my hot dog and eye his. He chose a cheesesteak dog which is basically a hot dog covered in cheese and strips of burnt beef. It looks amazing though.

“Want some?” he asks, offering me his food.

“You gonna throw that in my mouth too?”

“Nope.” He wags his brows and holds it out to me and motions for me to do the same with mine. Somehow, much to our amusement, we

manage to feed each other a bite of each other's hot dogs with minimal mess. Though my cheek and nose are greasy when I pull back and his lips are covered in red sauce.

"Man, that's hot," he gasps, wafting his mouth. "How can you eat that? It's too spicy."

"I like putting hot things in my mouth."

He stops wafting and gives me a look that screams of innuendos I know he wants to say aloud. "Can't tell if being serious or not. Want to join in but don't want fork in eye."

"Did I break your brain? Suddenly you can't speak in full sentences?"

My phone rings, it's a withheld number. I frown at it and flip it over.

"Want me to answer it? It could be work."

I shake my head. "It's not work-related. I have a new cell for that, nobody else knows my personal number. I'm going to change my personal number."

"You're serious, aren't you? I can't believe how strong you're being."

"You expected me to be what?"

"I expected you to give in by now and talk to him."

I blow a raspberry. "If I hear his voice now, it'll be like going back to the night he abandoned me. There's nothing he has to say that I want to hear. It is what it is. It hurts. I'm moving on. Can we stop talking about it?"

He throws a tater tot at me, this time just for fun. "About who?"

"Exactly."

My phone rings again, I look at it, happy to see Laurie's gorgeous smile on my screen.

"Hey, beautiful," I say with a huge smile, opening my mouth when Robert throws another tater tot my way.

"Hey, lover. You busy?"

"I'm out with Robert right now, is it important?"

"Nah, I just miss you."

I smile at that. I love Laurie. "I miss you too. I'll call you later."

"Deal."

We hang up and I look down at my lap and frown. There's a small pile of tater tots gathering on my lap and I didn't even notice. When I grab them all and throw them in his face, he laughs hysterically and draws the eyes of everyone around us.

He has a nice laugh.

And even though there are many attractive women around us giving him hungry eyes, his laughing eyes are on me and me alone.

This could get messy if I let it, but after Ezra, I have way more

strength than that.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirty-Nine

How desperate he is to hold me.

Robert's bachelor apartment is packed with many cool and influential people. I network, I'm good at that for the most part. I float around like a busy little bee, looking and feeling incredible, drinking gin from the open bar and acting entirely out of character.

I know I said that I didn't want any games, but I want Ezra to see me in my new element. I want him to think that I'm not missing him, at all.

Which I'm not. Not at all. Not even a little bit.

"He's here," Robert whispers in my ear, wrapping an arm around my waist. "He brought a guest."

When I shoot my gaze to the entrance, Robert turns me to face Mr. Watanabe and his wife who are sitting not too far from where I'm standing.

"Don't look too eager. He brought his wife."

My heart sinks. I feel sick.

"I should go."

"I think that's why he wanted to speak to you," Robert mutters in my ear, his arm still around my waist. "Likely to be sure you wouldn't out yourself to Elizabeth."

I turn, searching through the crowd. My eyes hit the back of Ezra's head and I struggle to breathe. Beside him is Elizabeth, her hand on his shoulder, the one that dons her platinum wedding band. Her hair is golden blonde and perfectly up in an intricate twist. From what I can see she's wearing thin straps that lead to a stunning silver dress.

Then she turns as though feeling my eyes and her brown eyes light up when they see me. She smiles and I read her lips, "Ezra, it's Rose."

"You okay?" Robert asks as I try to take a casual stance beside him.

Ezra and Elizabeth are coming our way and Ezra's eyes are burning into me, daring me to look at him. I don't. *I can't.*

Instead I focus on Elizabeth who hugs me. Something she has never done before.

"We have felt your loss so hard," she says, squeezing me and then

releasing me. “Ezra is struggling to replace you and I didn’t realize just how much you did for me before you vanished.”

I make a strange humming slash grunting noise because I don’t know how to speak. I scan her body in the sleek dress that fits her like a second skin, but I see no sign of a baby bump. She’s got to be sixteen or more weeks now. Shouldn’t she have something?

“What happened? Why did you decide to leave?” I’ve never seen her so happy and friendly, but then I remember she’s got her man back and a new baby on the way, of course she’s happy.

“Better job, better pay, better people,” I say and my eyes cut to Ezra. The bitterness in my tone doesn’t go amiss and Elizabeth’s smile falters. I quickly add, “Meaning Pax for example. I just couldn’t be where he was anymore.”

“He got arrested for harassing another coworker. Turns out he’s got a history of violence towards women but nothing concrete enough to put him away until now,” Elizabeth tells me with raised brows. “He beat his new woman so bad she had to have her nose reconstructed.”

I choke on a gasp. “You’re kidding?”

“You had a lucky escape,” Robert mutters and we share a look of agreement.

She didn’t though. How sad.

Ezra glances between us, he’s trying to catch my eyes. “He’s on bail pending trial and of course he has been fired from the company.”

“Something you should have done sooner,” Robert accuses, his body tight, his fingers digging into my side.

“I worried if I didn’t have his job as leverage over him, he would keep going for Rose.”

“That does make sense,” Elizabeth puts in thoughtfully, her hand now on her husband’s chest. I remember touching that chest just six weeks ago, I remember digging my fingers into the hard muscles of his chest. I remember the sound he made and how he whimpered when I ground down on his cock.

She suddenly sniffs the air, leaning closer to me. “You smell so nice, what is that?”

Truth be told it’s a fragrance Ezra had made just for me, a mixture of roses and sugarplums and whatever else. He was always so generous, forever surprising me with the sweetest gifts despite the fact I had very little to give him in return. It’s still my favorite fragrance.

“Excuse me, I need to use the ladies’ room,” I mutter, ducking my head and pulling away from them all.

“So how long have you been dating?” Elizabeth asks Robert but I don’t stick around for his answer.

I push through the crowd, smiling at people as I go and head to the guest bathroom in the guest bedroom. I half expected to find people

making out on the bed like some frat party but thankfully that never happened. This party has become awkward enough.

I head into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. Can she see my guilt? Can he see my love? It's shining from my eyes like light from a flashlight. I don't know how to get a check on it all.

I wash my hands six times, to at least feel a little cleaner and less of a snake. Then I dry them, taking my time, and finally exit the bathroom turning to pull the door as I step out.

I shriek when I sidestep into a warm body and a hand comes up to clasp over my mouth. With wide eyes I look at Ezra whose incredible grays are blazing down at me, so desperate and wild.

When he's satisfied I'm not about to scream, he lets me go but only to slide his hand around to my neck. His own love, guilt, desperation, and lust pours from his eyes, mirroring my own.

I sob once, fighting the urge to cry as I inhale his sweet, masculine scent and recall what it was like to be in his arms.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, his voice so quiet I can hardly hear it. "I am so sorry, Rose. I miss you so much."

"Step back," I hiss, fighting the tears. "Step back right now before it's too late."

"I can't." His forehead rests against mine and he backs me into the bathroom door that I closed behind me. My back hits the wood and his lips skim against my own.

I fight it. I fight so hard as he nips at my lips, just grazing them with his own and his teeth.

I listen to the party going on beyond the door and try to focus on it as just his teasing has me wetter than Niagara Falls between my thighs.

"I miss you. It's hell without you." His breath tickles my cheeks and even that sends need and desire spiraling through me. I'm so hot and needy.

"Stop," I whimper, pushing weakly at his chest as his hands push down my thighs and then drag my dress up to my hips. He kisses me and I get lost in it. For a moment I forget that he's not mine and let him hitch my leg over his hip. I groan and grind against him, opening my mouth to taste him like before. He tastes incredible. He tastes forbidden. He tastes of sin, sweet, salacious sin.

He groans like a starved man eating his first meal in weeks and rocks against me.

But then the bedroom door rattles, snapping me out of this weak moment I got lost in and we part, both of us hungry and swollen but I seem to be the only one that's devastated.

I panic when the door rattles again and shove him so hard he falls onto the bed.

I consider climbing onto his lap and fucking him to oblivion regardless of who is beyond the door, but then I think of how I'd feel being somebody's pregnant wife with a husband like him.

"Stay away from me," I cry, feeling tears burn my cheeks. My makeup is going to be a mess. "You're a cruel man, Ezra Conti."

"Wait… Rose—"

I return to the bathroom and lock myself in it, if only to better present myself for when I leave and if only for a moment of peace to cry a little more.

"I…" I hear him say through the door. It thuds, I imagine his head pressing against it and wish I had the courage and strength to open the door and take him into my arms, let him fuck me against the wall the way I want without even thinking of the people we will hurt if we get caught.

Why do I have to have a conscience? Why?

"I love you, I can't turn it off. I need you. Even just… just an email, a text… *please.*" He finishes, and I hear him walk away as I grasp the vanity and wonder how he can torture me so.

I fix my face and wait a few minutes until somebody else opens the door. I pass the oblivious woman, smiling at her as I go. When I return to the party, Robert returns to my side with a fresh drink in hand, this one much stronger than the last.

"You okay?"

I shake my head. "Ezra just followed me into the bathroom."

"Want to talk about it?" he asks quietly.

"I hate him," I reply, downing the drink. "But I'm here for you, not him and you are going to have the best party of your entire life."

"Am I now?" he questions, his lips smirking and his eyes on mine.

"Yep," I respond with a firm nod and drag him to the bar. "Let's start by getting drunk."

He follows, chuckling and letting me pull him along, eyes watch us but I don't care. Robert is single, I'm not at work and I've never let loose like I'm about to before.

"Tequila Rose," I demand, grinning at the hired barman. "Four shots." I turn to the crowd and yell, "ANYBODY ELSE?"

"Hell yeah!" an unknown male cheers and soon there's a gathering of us passing around shot glasses of creamy pink liquid.

We count down from three, and with a cheer, we swallow the sweet, tangy alcohol, and with a cringe as the burn relinquishes its hold on my throat, I demand another. Robert is right there alongside me.

The music soon changes, and the lights go down and the fun people linger whereas the ones not looking to party like they're teens again escape. We order takeout on Robert's card and stuff our faces

with pizza. We dance a little too, but I only partake in that when forced.

I'm acutely aware of Ezra watching me the entire night, especially now as I play a game of poker, *badly*, with my new friends around a coffee table. Robert is pressed against my side, his arm along the back of the couch.

"I'm getting tired," Elizabeth says to her husband, rubbing his thigh and kissing his cheek.

I want to scream at him. I want to ramble at him in drunk language but instead I slap my cards on the table and shout, "Full house!"

"Fuck," Joshua, my new friend, and Sally, my other new friend, both laugh as I scrape my few dollars towards my body.

"I am so going to put this towards sushi tomorrow. Best hangover food ever."

Halley, the woman I met through Robert during my first visit to the city, begs, "Please let me come. I *love* sushi but nobody else does so I never get to eat it."

We bump knuckles. Something drunk me now does.

"We're going to head out," Ezra says to Robert who is now whispering in my ear and playing with my hair. He's only telling me what hand I've got because I'm too drunk to see the cards.

"Boring," I say to the man leaving with my soul.

He looks torn between staying and leaving, but in the end, much to my fucking heartbreak, he will leave me again.

"It's my fault," Elizabeth defends, smiling up at the man who owns my soul. "Sorry. Maybe we can meet tomorrow after your sushi lunch?"

I'm about to tell her to go fuck herself as hard as I fucked her husband a month and a half ago, but Robert, likely sensing my drunken change, turns my face towards him and kisses me on the lips.

I'm surprised, of course I am, I wasn't expecting it, but I go with it. Kissing him back like the drunken harlot that I am, welcoming his tongue in my mouth and moaning like we're alone and not in a room full of people.

Halley cheers and hollers like a teenager and I laugh against Robert's lips when Joshua and Sally both join in.

He tastes sweet, like soda and lime. I tingle where we connect but I'm too drunk to really feel it anywhere else.

When we part, Ezra and Elizabeth are gone and our little group cheer louder.

"You okay?" he asks softly, his voice a breath against my lips.

"I'm okay."

We smile at each other, but really, I'm picturing Ezra's face in my

mind which is unfair of me. I just wish I'd seen his reaction. But then that would be another moment burned to my mind forever.

"You okay?" I ask him, my eyes hazy… or is his face blurry? Who knows?

He kisses me in response, sucking on my lower lip.

"Get a room," Halley jokes as Sally and Joshua stand.

"Where are you going?" I ask, gazing at them after forcing my eyes away from Robert's. A difficult task what with how intense they were and unfocused.

"It's almost two," Sally answers sadly, shrugging her shoulders.

"I'm in the guest room." Halley stands, stretches, and yawns. "See you in the morning, bitches."

As Robert sees out Sally and Joshua, Halley gets herself a glass of water and brings one to me too. I thank her and drink as much of it as possible while she slinks away into the guest bedroom.

That just leaves me, Rob, and a super untidy apartment.

"Fun night, huh?"

I stand, collecting discarded glasses between my hands, using every available palm and finger space. "Definitely. You throw great parties." I move to the sink and place the glasses beside it, swaying a little on the way.

I'm about to reach for more discarded glasses that are further along the side when warm fingers brush my hair from my neck. The fingers are soft and slightly rough, I can almost pretend they're Ezra's.

"You were the life of the party tonight," he whispers, reminding me that he's Robert. I hate that I feel less of an impact from his touch after that realization. "And you shouldn't be cleaning."

"It's driving me crazy," I admit, turning to face him in the dark, open-plan kitchen.

"*You're* driving *me* crazy." He dips his head and claims my lips. I accept it, closing my eyes and melting into him, wishing I wasn't so drunk so I could feel it more than I am.

I gasp when he lifts me onto the counter edge and nudges between my thighs, bringing my hips to the edge so he can press his hardness against me. With the amount of alcohol he has consumed, I'm surprised he's hard at all.

It would be so easy to do this, to get him to rip off my panties and enter me. Being drunk makes it seem like a really good idea. But it would mean more to him than it would to me, or that's how it seems. So I pinch his chin between my finger and thumb and shake my head slightly when he looks at me.

He sighs gravely and rests his forehead against my collarbone for a moment. "What is it about me that you don't like?"

Giggling, I grip his hair and pull his head back. "What is it about

me that you do?"

"Seriously," he mumbles, not partaking in my banter. "What can I do to make you look at me the way you look at him?"

I release his hair so I can massage his head with my fingers. "If only love had an off switch."

"And rewiring potential."

I laugh and press a gentle kiss to his lips. "I'm going to sleep with Halley and then in the morning I'm going to get up, clean this apartment, and drag you to the closest sushi bar. Deal?"

"No deal," he grips my thighs and levels me with a heated look. "You're going to sleep with me and then in the morning, *I'm* going to get up, clean this apartment, and then let you drag Halley to the closest sushi bar while I sleep more. Deal?"

"I can't sleep with you."

"Why?" His question is one of genuine curiosity. His hands massage my thighs higher; I shiver. I love being petted and rubbed.

"Because—" I gasp when his thumb suddenly presses against my clit through my soaked panties.

We both groan when he rolls it, circling at a slow but strong pace.

"You're so wet," he breathes, "so I know that I affect you."

"Your ability to turn me on has never been called into question." I grip his wrist when he slides that same thumb under the material, touching me bare. Burning need shoots through me and I have to stop my drunken self from pushing his head down to finish what he has started.

"So why do you deny me?" Hungry eyes with dilated pupils scan my face and his other thumb sinks inside of me. "Fuck… don't deny me now that I've had the slightest promise from your incredibly tight pussy."

"Robert… *please,*" I whimper, rocking my hips as he rubs me in both perfect spots at the exact same time. I feel on fire.

Is this my thing now? Falling into bed with every attractive man that gives me attention?

"Still want to say no?"

"I have to," I cry, parting my legs wider. "I don't want us to change."

"Too late." When he sucks his thumb, the one that was inside of me, into his mouth, I inhale a sharp breath. That was seriously hot. "I've tasted you now."

I grab his head and pull his lips back to mine. I bite him hard on his lower lip, feeling a courage that I never would have without this level of alcohol in my system. He bites me back and I inhale sharply. I taste blood but it doesn't do anything to deter me.

"Condom," I whisper aggressively in between kisses as our

movements and gropes become more frantic and desperate.

He yanks his wallet out of his back pocket and searches through it while I kiss and suck his neck and my hands pull him free of his pants. He's got a great cock, strong, hard, proud, thick… I start to mentally compare it but berate myself and roll the rubber over his predominant tip.

He moans when I grasp him, lifting me just enough to push my dress up and hike my panties down, but when they snag on my thighs, he opts to rip them instead. I giggle and toss them over my shoulder before guiding him to my entrance.

He's there… he's ready… I'm going to have sex with my only friend that lives nearby. I'm weaker than I thought. There are so many alarms going off in my head that are telling me to stop this.

"Here?" he asks, wiping blood from my lip with his thumb. He looks at it on his pale flesh and his eyes flash dangerously. The way he's looking at me right now is so intense and insanely sexy.

I glance around the apartment, ready with my excuse on the tip of my tongue when Halley's bedroom door suddenly opens.

She likely thinks we've gone to bed, and we're too frozen in place, too drunk to react quick enough.

We both scramble to compose ourselves. I drop down from the counter and try to untwist the skirt of my dress and Robert struggles with the zipper of his pants. Then he falls to his knees with a cry and seems to be holding his crotch.

"Robert?" I question, confused and concerned by his sudden stance of pain. "What's wrong?"

"Dick… zipper," he croaks, sounding agonized.

"Oh dear." I crouch in front of him. "Is it Something About Mary trapped? Or just caught a little?"

"Unsure." He falls to his side, still clutching his dick.

"Hey, what's going on?" Halley asks, peeking around the island that was hiding us from view.

"In his rush for modesty he injured himself," I explain, trying not to laugh my ass off. I pull away his hands and assess his softening penis for damage. Thankfully the zipper tore through the condom and pinched just the skin of his penis, leaving a bit of a scrape and likely a bruise but nothing major.

"Let me see?" Halley asks, sounding more curious than concerned. "Ooooh."

"What does *oooh* mean?" he panics, looking down at his dick. "Turn on the light."

"Nothing, I was just empathizing."

"Can you both stop staring at my dick now?"

Halley giggles and I give his thigh a gentle pat.

“Your penis is still attached to your body. It’s not bad. Will some ice help?”

“Maybe a kiss better?”

I roll my eyes and peel the condom from him carefully before tucking him back into his pants. “Come on, Casa-no-no. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Sorry, guys,” Halley starts but I wave her off. “If I’d known you were getting with it in the kitchen, I might have peeked but I certainly wouldn’t have interrupted.”

“Voyeurism, kinky,” I reply while smiling at our mutual friend who is watching us with extreme amusement.

When I stand to full height, he rubs his penis area, a pained expression still on his face. “That’s not how I imagined I’d get your face close to my dick.”

I smack his chest. “Idiot. Who gets their penis trapped in their zipper?”

“Drunk me, apparently.”

I hook his arm around my neck, fully intent on babying him the way he thinks he deserves.

“You poor thing.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Forty

No other man compares. No matter how hard I try to put them on his pedestal.

I left Robert in the kitchen after spending the night with him curled around my body, his sore but erect penis pressed against my butt all night. He kissed me when we woke, a slow and sensual kiss that I returned briefly before getting ready for the day.

When I escaped his apartment after brewing a pot of coffee for him to wake up to, I expected to just go home, sleep some more and forget about how drunk I was last night.

Instead I find myself face to face with an irritated-looking Ezra as he leans against the side of his parked car and assesses my state of dress. I took a spare change of clothes so I'm not doing the walk of shame, having known I'd probably spend the night at Robert's.

"Morning," he greets, his tone as tight as his body.

I stop and stare at him, the way his biceps are bulging against the fabric of his short-sleeve T-shirt make me remember how they looked while holding him up as he thrusted inside of me.

"The man that broke my heart, just who I wanted to see first thing in the morning."

"It's actually eleven, not daybreak, and I never meant to break your heart." His voice… God, his voice… why do I love it so? "Can we talk?"

I look at where he's parked illegally and wonder how long it will take for him to get a ticket. "What's left to say?"

"Everything. Nothing. Something."

"Why do you insist on it, Ezra? Why can't we just pretend we don't exist?"

He steps towards me, his gray eyes stormy with need and grief, "Because life without even a fraction of you just feels so fucking bleak."

My breath catches because I feel the same. "I can't sit and watch you and Elizabeth play happy family."

"You won't have to. I'm asking for emails, texts… anything…

anything… smoke signals. Just something of you. Weekly updates. A conversation. Nothing seedy, nothing sexual… just…"

"Friends?" I almost laugh hysterically and sob even more hysterically. "You *fired* me. You left me in the middle of the fucking night after making love to me *twice*." He flinches but I don't hold back. "You promised me a family, a future, a life together and then you took it away without even saying goodbye to my face." I shove his chest, ignoring passersby who look our way. I hope somebody films this, uploads it, and outs him for the shit he is. "*You broke me.* And now you want weekly updates on how I'm doing? What the fuck is that? I never even want to see you again."

"You don't mean that… what we have is… it's real and you know it."

"No, your marriage is real. What we had were sprinkles on the top of your perfect world and TNT in the foundations of my already shit one."

"Cuore mio," he breathes, looking pained. When he reaches for me, I slap his hand away.

"I'm going," I say firmly.

"Get in the car, let's go for a ride."

"Are you crazy?"

"Please… ten minutes, and I'll bring you back, I swear."

I'm about to say no but truth be told I want to be around him just as much as he wants to be around me. If only for a little while. His presence, though he destroyed me, still comforts me. "Ten minutes."

He smiles, relieved, and opens the passenger side door for me. I pass him, about to climb in when he kisses my cheek and slides his hand around my waist. He sniffs my neck and scowls. "You smell like Robert."

"You smell like Elizabeth," I retort, sitting and buckling myself in. He checks my belt like he always does whenever we travel together. I discreetly pull out my perfume from my handbag and spritz a bit behind my ears and on my wrists. He smiles secretly but it fades when I ask, "How is your pregnant wife?"

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"Talk about her."

"Then what do you want to talk about?"

He puts the car in drive and pulls out onto the busy street. "You. How is your new job? Your new life?"

"My new job is amazing; my new life is yet to be discovered but I'm almost happy if that's what you're asking."

He smiles softly. "Good."

"Definitely. I get way more respect in my new workplace than my

last."

A muscle ticks in his jaw. "At least I gave you a chance."

"And then ripped my heart from my chest."

"Don't, tesoro mio," he begs. "I haven't seen you or spoken to you in nearly six weeks. I just… want to have a conversation. I went from seeing you every day to not seeing you at all. It is killing me."

"Then maybe you do love me in your own way," I mutter, and he turns to face me, stalling at a red light.

"You think I don't love you?"

I shrug my shoulders but don't answer.

"I can't even touch my wife for wanting you so badly. I've done nothing but think of you since we parted like there's space for nothing else in my mind and heart but you."

He can't touch his wife…

"Do you think that's healthy? Staying together like that even for the baby?"

He shakes his head and starts to drive again. "Of course I don't but what else can I do? I married her, she's pregnant with my child. She's so desperate to make this work she's willing to overlook my affair."

"Will she if she knows who it is and that you're with her right now?"

"She doesn't want to raise the baby alone, she's terrified, she didn't take well to Maria in the beginning, her labor was very traumatic. She needs me. The child needs me."

I frown, that's sad to hear but still, it's not my problem. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I'm trapped, I feel trapped." True to his word, he pulls back in front of Robert's apartment building in the same space as before and turns towards me; the rear end of his car sticks out into the road but he doesn't seem to care. "And I miss you and if I can't have you then at least allow me a piece of you." His eyes roam over my face and he reaches out a hand to cup my cheek. "I know I do not deserve it and I know I should not want it, but I *need* it. I *need* you."

He pulls us together, my forehead against his and my hand immediately seeks out his heartbeat.

"Please." He whispers to me in Italian, begging me with words I don't understand while peppering kisses all over my face. His lips find my tears and kiss those away as his thumb strokes my cheek and he continues whispering in his beautiful language. "Ti amo."

"Ti amo," I whisper back and press my lips to his. Allowing myself one last taste of him. "We will correspond sometimes. Rarely… but sometimes."

"Grazie," he replies and tastes me again, deepening the kiss with a moan that has me squirming in my seat. "Losing you will always be

my greatest regret."

"Falling in love with you will always be mine," I respond breathlessly and climb from the car.

I head towards the parking lot where I left my new vehicle yesterday and mutter a very unattractive curse under my breath when I see Halley gaping at me, mouth wide open, eyes even wider, arm suspended in mid-air like she was about to put her bag on her shoulder.

"What the fuck?" she cries, and I just know this is going to be *a moment*.

"So… that's…" Halley gapes at me, struggling to find words. "Wow."

I stick a piece of sushi in my mouth and chew it. Yum. "I mean… I know it was bad, but can you imagine falling head over heels for somebody while loving another?"

"That's conflicting."

"It so is. I felt constant guilt at what we were doing but like constant desperation and worry that he'd leave me for her. Which is unfair because he was always hers and never mine." I sit back and eat more delicious sushi. "I'm a horrible person."

"Maybe."

I glare at her, making her laugh.

"I mean… it's not great what you did but I get it. Love is such a trap."

"You can say that again."

We swap sushi bowls, because she's never tried my favorite and I've never tried hers.

"And now he wants me to keep in touch. I'm trying *so hard* to move on."

She wags her brows and I feel like I'm just sitting with female Robert. "Last night is a testament to that."

"But he's desperate to keep hold and it's not fair."

She sighs and drinks her water, losing herself in her thoughts for a moment. "I suppose it's even harder to move on from somebody you know still wants you."

I nod and admire her dark blonde hair and pale eyes. She's gorgeous. I wonder why she and Robert have never tried for a relationship. "I just don't know what to do. He's married. He's having a baby."

"But you still love him with every romantic fiber of your pathetic soul."

I click my finger and thumb and point at her. "*Exactly."*

She grins at me, takes a bite of my spicy roll and then drinks more water.

Meanwhile I ask, “So… Robert’s single… you’re single…”

She chokes on her water and starts laughing hysterically. A pleasant sound for sure. She doesn’t have an annoying laugh in the slightest.

“What?”

“I was waiting for you to ask but it took you so long I figured you’d worked it out all on your own.”

“Worked what out?”

She wags her brows at me, looking so much like Robert but not in the sense that they’re related, just that they’ve spent a lot of years being friends. “I’m more into girls than guys at the moment. Robert has been my friend since I was in middle school. Also… I’m totally a virgin.”

“But you’re like… twenty-six?”

“I’m celibate—*sorta*.”

I blink slowly. “Are you pulling my dick?”

“Never pulled a dick in my life. I’m waiting for *the one*.”

“So not marriage?”

“Hell no. I’m just waiting for love before I lose my cherry. I’ve never been *in love* so I’ve never had sex.”

I smile at her. “That’s so lovely. I didn’t lose my virginity until I was in my early twenties. But that’s more cowardice and because sex seemed gross to me then.”

“Well done for hanging on for that long, everyone I knew as I was growing up lost their V-cards age fifteen to eighteen. I didn’t understand what the rush was, but then I just figured they didn’t have vibrators yet.”

“Right?” I fist-bump her for that one because I used to think the same thing. Fist bumping is now something sober me does too. Though I’m not convinced I am in fact sober.

“How was Robert when you left this morning?”

“Sobbing in the bathroom while he peed.”

“Really?”

I shake my head and giggle. “No, he kissed me though. Now that I let him once, he thinks he can do it all the time.”

“You’re not interested?”

Shrugging my shoulders, I look down at my food sadly. “I’m still in love with Ezra. I’m not about to lead Robert on when another man is the focal point of all my thoughts. It’s like my will to stay away is strong but my ability to forget about him is weak.”

“Doesn’t help that you have photographic memory.”

“Exactly. That part doesn’t help at all.”

She reaches over and pats my hand. “You’ll be okay in the end. This feeling will go, and you’ll move on.”

“I hope you’re right.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Forty-One

He says the sweetest things, in English and Italian.

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: Response is essential.

Tesoro mio,
How is my beautiful beloved today? Tell me about every hour from start to finish.
I miss you already,

Forever your soul,
Ezra.

I bite my lip as I stare at the email to my personal account from the man I've sworn to avoid, but I did promise him a weekly update, so I'll give him that at least.

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com
From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
Subject: Response is NOT essential.

I thought you said nothing sordid or secretive? Stop telling me that you miss me, it feels like you punch me in the face, say sorry, punch me in the face, say sorry, and again and again. If you miss me why aren't you with me?
Stop missing me. Stop punching me in the face.
My day has been busy. I'm at work.
I really don't think I can do this with you. It's still too raw.

Forever my regret,

Rose.

Too harsh? Probably.

I close my phone and get back on with my job. It has been approximately two weeks since Robert's party and my last run-in with Ezra, and though he sent me an email last week, my emotions were too raw, so I ignored it and I don't feel sorry about that in the slightest.

Speaking of Robert, we've fallen into what I can only describe as an easy-ish friendship. We haven't spent time alone together since the party and he hasn't tried to kiss me since. I'm grateful for that, though I think Halley might have influenced his decision in that regard. She hasn't said but it is likely she told him what she saw happening between Ezra and me.

He hasn't mentioned it either and we have spoken a lot since then.

I just don't see myself being with him, not even when Ezra becomes a fading member of my past.

The company phone rings, I answer after clearing my throat.

"Rose Sinclair speaking, how may I help?"

"It's Jenny," my favorite operator says with a cautious tone, "there's a lady on line three who wants to speak with you. A Mrs. Conti?"

I purse my lips. "Izabella or Elizabeth?"

"Could be either, sorry I didn't check."

"Thanks, Jenny, put her through."

The line goes dead for a moment and then hums back to life.

"Rose Sinclair speaking."

"How long have you been fucking my husband?"

I close my eyes and consider hanging up the phone. Instead I play dumb. "Who is this?"

"How many husbands are you sleeping with?"

"None, hence my confusion."

She hesitates and I hear her sniffle and exhale a staggered breath. Oh shit. This conversation is not going to be fun. "It's Elizabeth, you massive whore."

"I'm at work. Can I call you later?"

"Absolutely not. You can answer my questions on *my* time not *yours*," her tone is soft not harsh, she sounds sad. "You know? I had a private detective follow you both for three months, it cost me a fucking fortune and he said you were hardly even friends… now… did you see him and pay him off before he could report back to me? Or did my cheating bastard of a husband betray me after that? When did it start?"

I rest my head in my hands for a moment, still gripping the

receiver but away from my face. “Have you spoken to Ezra?”

“It’s not Ezra to you, it’s Mr. Conti!”

“Regardless, have you spoken to him?”

“Not yet.”

I consider putting her on hold and calling him, but I need to face the music. I did this. She’s entitled to her anger and it’s the least I deserve to listen to it.

“Whatever happened between your husband and me ended a while ago. I’m not going near him again.”

“You mean like the morning after that party two weeks ago?”

“What? How did you—?”

She inhales sharply and bites out, “I could smell your fucking perfume in his rental car, but truth be told, I was already suspicious at your sudden departure when he decided to return to me. And when he wouldn’t tell me who he’d been fucking behind my back, I knew it was somebody we both know. I just… I hoped it wasn’t you.”

“I’m so sorry—”

“DON’T SAY YOU’RE FUCKING SORRY!”

“Hey,” I try to soothe. “Look, I know you’re hurt and angry and I know you probably want to strangle me right now but save it for after you’ve had the baby.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I wasn—”

“When did it start? Answer me.”

I close my eyes. It’s not for me to lie so I choose to be honest. “After the night of the big deal with the Japanese buyers.”

“Oh my God, that was so long ago, but he said… he said it was just a few times…” she breathes, choking on a sob and the shame I feel is so overwhelming tears burn my eyes. “Oh my GOOOOOOOOD! FUUUUUUUUCK! Why? Why? Why? Why?”

“We weren’t good people. I have no excuse. I never meant for it to happen.”

She cries for a while and I listen, taking in the hurt I caused, letting it wash over me like a tsunami of razor blades against my skin and soul. “I can’t… this… no… I wanted you to deny it and tell me that I’m being paranoid and tell me that my husband wasn’t finding pleasure in your body at work while I stayed at home, forever his faithful little wife.” She sniffs and sobs again and I squeeze the phone. “When was the last time you slept together?”

“We should—”

“TELL ME! You owe me that much, you husband-stealing bitch.”

I want to tell her that he chose her… but that would be a lie. It’s also not for me to say. So instead I opt for the truth. Because she’s right, I do owe her that much.

"The night of your divorce hearing."

There's silence for a really long time and I think that she might have hung up, but then she starts screaming again in the background and smashing things.

"Elizabeth?" I whisper, listening to her tear something apart, her anguished sobs destroying me inside.

But then I hear his voice, his deep, shocked voice and I stop breathing. "Elizabeth! What are you doing?"

"You had an affair with Rose?"

"What?"

"YOU FUCKED ROSE! YOU LIED. AND LIED. AND LIED!"

His muffled, deep voice is calm and wary when he insists, "Think of the baby and calm down, let's talk."

"The baby? I don't want it. I don't want a baby with you. I don't want you!" she sobs, sounding more broken than I've ever heard anybody sound. "I hate you. I *hate you*. How could you? You're nothing but a liar."

The line dies, I hear nothing else. I immediately race into the bathroom to vomit into the toilet.

My stomach burns and aches as I expel all my breakfast. That doesn't taste good.

Rose: Elizabeth just called, she knows about me and Ezra.

Laurie: FUUUCCCKK noooo way… dude… how did she take it?

Rose: Better than I expected.

Rose: In the sense that I think she trashed his car or something while we were on the phone.

Laurie: Poor Elizabeth. How'd she find out?

Rose: I think she just pieced things together after I was a dick and sprayed my perfume while in her husband's rental car two weeks ago.

Laurie: Bitch… WHAT? Why were you in his rental car?

Rose: He wanted to talk, I missed him. I had a weak moment.

Laurie: You ass.

Rose: I know. Nothing happened though. We kissed but it was

more like a goodbye than anything.

I place my phone down as I wash my face and rinse my mouth out with mouthwash. It's better than nothing.

When it rings again it vibrates so hard it falls off the vanity and clatters on the tiled floor. I tentatively pick it up, but when I see Ezra's name on the screen, I disconnect the call and turn it off.

This is not my problem… not anymore.

As terrible as I feel, he's calling for one of two reasons, to either get angry that I was honest with his wife, or to vent about it. I'm not interested in being his confidant, it's not fair on Elizabeth, and I certainly don't deserve his ire.

A week later, I'm not surprised to find no email from him, nor am I the week after that.

Though the following week, however, is full of surprises.

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: Happy Birthday!

Yet another I have missed. How have you spent it? With your friends? Your lover? Have you had cake yet?

I'm assuming a visit from me would not be welcome. Though I'd very much like to see you, I really would like to talk to you. I apologize for not being in touch for a while. I've been busy, as you can imagine.

Forever your soul,
Ezra.

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com
From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
Subject: Thank you.

I thought I'd feel older and wiser but apparently not. Although an entire month has passed since you kissed me in the car, and two weeks have passed since your wife raged down the phone to me, my emotions are so raw as if no time has passed at all.

Will I ever get over you? Will you ever let me?

You ask me about lovers as though it is so easy for me to find

somebody to replace the gaping hole you left in my chest. Do I sound bitter? I hope so.

Forever my biggest regret,
Rose.

P.S. That's a hell no, I don't want a visit from you. How can you ask me that after what happened? What is wrong with you? Give Elizabeth peace of mind and stay away from temptations.

I'm feeling particularly maudlin today as I often do on my birthdays. Even though I have good friends to celebrate it with now, I still don't have the one thing I've always wanted and needed, a family of my own.

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: Answer your phone when I call.

Things have changed, I would very much like to see you and speak to you face to face. There are things to discuss.
Forever yours… always. Even now.

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com
From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
Subject: No.

Let me guess… she left your ass and now suddenly you're interested in me again? That's not how this works. I'm not interested anymore. Besides, not that it's any of your business but I am seeing somebody. Give it up already. Go be a dad and a husband.

Okay, so that was a lie. I'm not seeing anybody at all but I'm about done with feeling like this. Every time I open his emails or see his missed calls I die inside. How can my love and emotions for him be this intense even after all this time?

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: You really hate me… don't you?

Can we please talk? If only for a moment. I miss your voice.

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com
From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
Subject: I hate myself and how you make me feel.

Why do you insist on dragging this out? I miss your voice too, but it doesn't change anything. Can we just… be normal? Can we talk about mundane shit like you promised?

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: I still make you feel… this is good. Sei cosi importante per me.

How was your drive to work? Is it raining in Seattle?

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com
From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
Subject: Ti amo. Though I wish I didn't.

It's not, it's really warm which is nice for a change. My drive to work was uneventful. Though I can't say that about yesterday's as I almost hit an old man chasing a balloon for his grandson.

I thought only children ran into the roads after inanimate objects, but apparently cane-wielding old folks with fanny packs and wobbly knees also like to forget jaywalking rules.

Everybody was fine.

I may have cussed a little. I'm not proud of it but nobody heard me so I can forgive myself.

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: Ti amo. Ti amo. Ti amo.

Glad everyone was okay, sounds like a rough way to start your day.
What did you have for lunch?

I laugh, I can't help it. He's really aiming for those boring questions like I asked, but I'm going to play along for now. I shouldn't. But I am.

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com
From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
Subject: You're not allowed to love me.

I had a PB&J, some salted chips, a bag of cookies, a banana, some grapes, and a coffee.
I've gained a couple of pounds since I started working here. I need to hit the gym more.

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: Love doesn't need permission to thrive.

I love PB&J. I love extra pounds, especially on you.
I want to ask for a visual but I'm terrified you'll stop replying to my emails.

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com
From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
Subject: Love is a dick, that's why. Love needs to find a new home.

That's a clever way of asking without fully committing to the question.
The answer is no.
How was your day?

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: Love found its home in us. It doesn't need a new one.

I knew you'd appreciate it. I don't see any visuals attached to the email so I'm safely assuming your answer was no.

My day is abysmal. I want to be with my love on her birthday, but she won't permit it, despite the fact I know she wants it.

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com

From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com

Subject: That home was demolished long ago, it lingers in the rubble pointlessly.

It's my birthday. Of course I want it. All I ever wanted was you.

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com

From: E.Conti.LA@email.com

Subject: There's nothing pointless about our lingering love.

In that case, I'm outside of your apartment. I will wait for an hour. If you choose to join me, or not, it is your decision.

I would very much like to see you.

No way…

He's kidding right?

What do I do?

I consider calling Laurie but then she'll talk me out of it and I really don't want to be talked out of it. For all my bravado and desperation to stay away, I can't help but want to pull him close whenever I get the chance.

It's not right. In fact, it's so wrong. Especially after hearing Elizabeth cry the way she did.

How did he even find out where I live? I suppose his ridiculous amount of money had something to do with it.

He's come all this way, the least I can do is glance at him.

To: E.Conti.LA@email.com

From: Rose.Sinclair@email.com

Subject: It's pointless when it can't continue…

Like our meeting. It's not fair on those you love. Elizabeth will be devastated. She's pregnant.

To: Rose.Sinclair@email.com
From: E.Conti.LA@email.com
Subject: I don't believe that.

Please join me outside so we can talk. I swear I will not touch you. You have my written promise. Just give me time. Let me take you to dinner on your birthday, or anywhere you desire. I know you don't have plans with Robert, he told me so himself.

Of course he did.

That has Robert all over it.

Though why they're discussing me when I expressly asked them not to is anyone's guess.

Sighing, I dress in casual jean cut-offs and a white, long-sleeve, deep-V shirt that shows my cleavage and a hint of my white lace bra beneath. I add mascara, blush, and matte lipstick and even put on my favorite multi-layer gold necklace. I'm not trying to look good at all.

He's looking at his phone when I exit through the main doors of my apartment building. Damn, he looks good, his hair is shorter, his jaw shaved clean, his free hand tucked into the pocket of dark jeans, his arm muscles tight against the white button-up that reveals the dip of his throat.

I stop and give myself a moment to compose myself.

I miss his body against mine so terribly I ache.

Feeling me watching him he looks up, and I stop myself from racing into his arms.

"Hey, beautiful," he whispers when I approach slowly, and true to his word he doesn't touch me, he doesn't even kiss my cheek, just turns to the car that he parked illegally and opens the door for me.

"You've got to stop leaving your car wherever you want. You're going to get a ticket."

"I'm waiting right by it," he argues with a smile. "It doesn't count."

He's got me there.

"I got you a gift," he says softly and nods to the back seat of the car.

I turn and look over my shoulder, spying the gift-wrapped package in the middle of the seats. "What is it?"

"Don't open it yet," he urges, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. After switching on the radio, he keeps his eyes forward as I reach for the box that doesn't feel too heavy. "Not yet."

"That's just cruel," I mumble, pouting at him.

“I know, but there’s a thing to the gift that I need to talk to you about.”

“Now I’m even more curious.”

He laughs and goes to place his hand on my thigh but then he thinks better of it and places it back on the wheel. “Hopefully you’ll love it.”

“You’re the master gift giver, I doubt I’ll love it even a fraction less than you intended.”

We smile at each other and I wonder how we got here from what we were.

I miss him.

“I miss you,” I say before I can stop myself. “So much.”

“Not as much as I miss you. Trust me.”

In the restaurant we sit in a private area beyond patterned dividers. Such a romantic setting, especially with the rose-scented candle between us, though I don’t think that’s by accident. I finger the gold pattern on the tablecloth and sip my wine. It’s sweet, fruity, pleasant.

“You look stunning, I can’t keep my eyes off you,” he comments, smiling softly at me. “I’m so glad you agreed to come.”

“We shouldn’t be here though, not really. This is cheating… I feel like we aren’t learning any lessons.”

“Now that you’ve finished your steak, I want to talk, but I want you to listen and not jump to conclusions until I’ve finished.” He places his hand over mine when I look away. “Can you promise me that until I’ve finished you won’t walk away, run away, or interrupt me with conclusions?”

I hesitate, terrified of what he’s about to say next. “I’ll do my best.”

His thumb circles my palm and his tongue wets his pink lips. “Elizabeth and I have separated.” When I immediately try to pull my hand away, anger flaring through me, he grips it tighter and reminds me of my promise with a look. I relax and listen because I said I would, but I’m not sure I want to hear what he has to say anymore. “She’s not pregnant,” he rushes, “she never was.”

My jaw hits the floor. “WHAT? Oh my God… I’m so sorry.”

“She lied, she panicked, but truth be told I was sadly too relieved to be angry, and she saw that too. Though I still felt grief for the child I had started to warm up to the idea of, I knew that with it never existing might mean my life could take the course I wanted. The course I still want.”

Oh my God… *she lied.* “That’s cruel. Who does that?”

“A desperate woman in love with her shit husband,” he responds, pushing his hands through his hair, mussing it up in such a sexy way. “We talked about it and I forgive her for what she did though my

family not so much understandably. My mother was *very* hurt and poor Maria who doesn't understand at all."

My breath hitches at that confession.

"I hurt her badly, she returned the favor and we opened up in ways we haven't for years. I was finally honest with her about my feelings for you and our affair, and she was honest about the fake pregnancy and what she hoped to achieve. It turns out Elizabeth hoped to get pregnant when we returned to each other as a last-ditch effort to keep me, but I could not lie with her. I couldn't be with her while feeling such love and devotion for you."

"How did she convince you? Did you not attend her appointments?" I question, still reeling with shock.

"She doctored a sonogram. You can do many things with money."

I shake my head and give him my most empathetic look. "I'm so sorry, Ezra."

"Don't be. Maria and I spent a lot of time together during the two weeks you did not hear from me and we both made peace with it. She knows we are separating, and though she's sad, she still loves us both and Elizabeth and I agreed to put into motion legal joint custody. Effective immediately. So that neither can use our daughter as a weapon."

"That's a relief," I say because that was the one thing that always worried me the most. "So you'll get her…"

"We're doing one week on and one week off as opposed to splitting weeks. And holidays we will either take turns or halve the day. It all depends on Maria."

I sit back and blow out a heavy breath. "Poor Maria, but I'm happy you've all found a co-parenting method that works for you."

His gray eyes flash with humor. "For now and hopefully forever."

I sip my wine and he refills my glass when I place it back on the table. "How did she take your confession about me and you?"

"She was sad, and she'll never forgive us but she's more understanding of it now. She agreed that it's best we separate; she doesn't want to be married to a man who is so entirely consumed by another woman."

"I'm not enjoying this talk," I admit, sipping more wine. Though I love to hear how badly he craves me that he can't touch even his wife, but it fills me with grief and shame. Something I need to work on.

"I know. But I need you to hear me. This isn't a plea to get you back, I'm not going to ask you to return to me after what I did. But I am going to tell you that there is nobody else for me but you. I'm so very sure of that."

I sip even more wine hoping there's another bottle as we have finished this one between us.

“This isn’t about jumping into marriage and babies. This isn’t about not being able to be alone. This is me telling you that I’m sure. I am so sure about you I haven’t once wondered if this is right between us. It has only ever felt right.”

God… that’s so sweet.

“I don’t expect your forgiveness for what I did, I want the chance to build a new image of myself to erase the old one.”

“Is that even possible?”

“I hope so. You deserved better from me and I want to prove to you that I can be better.” He motions to my wrapped gift on the floor by our table. “Open it.”

After handing it to me, I move my empty plate to the side and gently peel back the paper, revealing a dark blue box with a lid. He takes the paper and tosses it on the floor. His teeth scrape his lower lip and his eyes are anxious.

I reveal a stunning crystal vase with a beautiful flowing rose pattern climbing up the sides. There’s a clear section, an oval an inch below the top of the narrow opening.

There’s an inscription in the middle, it reads:

Fill me with love

“I’m confused,” I murmur, turning it this way and that, letting it catch the light. It’s so very pretty.

“There’s more in the box.”

I place the vase carefully beside the box and pull out a small rose-shaped notebook that is nestled in the velvet beneath, no larger than my palm. Attached to the top of it is a rose-gold pen, also small, no larger than my finger.

“I’m sensing a rose theme here,” I say, giggling as I open the notebook and then flip through the blank pink pages. “But I really am confused. Not that I don’t love it.”

“It’s something I had made especially for you. Like I said, I don’t want to just get you back and pick up where we left off. I want to earn it. I want to call you every day, and email you, and take you on the most marvelous dates.”

“What does that have to do with…?” I trail my fingers over the glass, feeling the grooves of each rose.

He smiles brightly, showing his incredible teeth. “Well, this is my promise to you. That until that jar is full of all the reasons you love me, I’m not moving on, I’m not giving up on what we have.”

“Reasons I love you?”

“Every time something new occurs that makes you love me even more, I want you to write it down, fold it up, and put it in the jar.”

I blink slowly and take his hand again. “I already know that I love you.”

“But you still feel the pain of what I did to you. By the time you’ve filled this vase full of positive things that you love about me, you’ll have hopefully put that pain far behind you. I want to erase it. *I’m going to erase it.*” His eyes are determined, his words even more so. “Until then, I’ll not ask you to return to me, I’ll not try and ease you into my bed.”

“What happens if it never fills.”

He lifts a shoulder, but I see sadness in his eyes. “Then I guess I’ll be single until I die.”

I roll my eyes, he can’t be serious, though he looks it. “What happens when it does?”

“That will be entirely up to you.”

Thoughtfully nodding, I unclip the pen from the notebook and write my first note:

He gives the best gifts. So thoughtful.

When I fold it and put it in the jar he leans over the table and kisses my hand. “I take it that you’re willing to give me time?”

“I don’t know, but I’d like to try and stay in touch now that you’re single.” I level him with a look. “But it’s going to be hard to trust you.”

“I can imagine, but I’m going to work for it. You’ll see. It’s only day one.”

“You’re the sweetest man I ever met,” I whisper, and then I write that down too and fold it up before dropping it into the glass. “And I love the way you look at me.”

I write that down and his smile becomes one of complete mischief. “I can’t take my eyes off you.” He chuckles when I write down another.

He says the sweetest things, in English and Italian.

“Would you like dessert now?” he asks, motioning to the small menu on the corner of the table as I place the vase back in the safety of the box and tuck the notepad into my small purse.

“Let’s share one, I’m not sure I could eat one to myself.”

“Whatever you desire.”

Funnily enough I think he means that.

Later that night, after more pleasant conversations, more wine, a

shared lemon sponge and a nice walk through the city, he leaves me at the entrance to my building without even a kiss goodbye.

When I get upstairs, I place the vase in the middle of my dining table, and before the night is up, the bottom layer is filled. There are so many things to love about Ezra Conti. So many wonderful things.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Forty-Two

My happiness is as important to him as his is to me.

The jar is dwindling at half full despite the fact it has been a wonderful four months.

Every other weekend, Ezra has flown to Seattle to see me, unfortunately on his weekends without Maria but I understand why. He has wined me, dined me, and made me laugh until tears have streamed from my eyes.

Yet he hasn't kissed me, hasn't touched me beyond our desperate embraces every time he leaves and a kiss on the cheek every time he arrives again.

Halley is an overwhelming presence, she's constantly at my place talking about the guy she's dating while using my TV and games console because my TV is bigger. I don't mind. She's so sweet and she adores Laurie who comes once a month, though I suspect that's on Ezra's dime because she refuses my money and doesn't earn enough to fund the trips herself. I've not had the chance to return to LA yet, truth be told I'm terrified I'll bump into Elizabeth, or Ezra's mother, Izabella.

Pax is no longer an issue for me, I had a fortunate escape. He was sentenced to a year in prison for his assault on his new girlfriend who unfortunately decided to stand by him through the entire thing. An unfortunate but common theme when it comes to abused women or even men. I hope she learns one day that he is not the right man for her. I hope everyone in that kind of relationship does.

I was blessed to have been financially able and supported enough to walk away. I was blessed to find the love of a man like Ezra, despite our situation.

Robert was salty about our relationship at first, and though he has stayed my friend, he has been distant which concerned me. He's better now, I hope, and is joining us for lunch soon. Which is why I'm so on edge.

“I need to tell you something,” I mutter, biting my lip, giving Ezra puppy eyes so I look more forgivable.

“Now?” He looks up at the Sausage Palace and then back at me. “We’re about to head in.”

“I need to because I want you to hear it from me…”

My meaning isn’t lost on him. His body becomes tight and his throat bobs with an audible gulp. “Oh.”

“My attentions, though solely focused on my heartbreak, took a night off from my pain.” I tuck my hair behind my ears and place my hand on his chest. “The night of the party… Robert and I…” I wet my lips and count to six, he waits patiently. “Things happened between us, I won’t go into details but things got heated. I should have told you sooner but I chickened out and now I realize how dishonest that was but I swear I have done nothing with anybody else or even him since. Except we kissed a couple of times—”

He places his hand over my mouth, effectively stopping my ramble, and his eyes, hurt and full of envy, scan my face. I hear him mutter the number six before he drops his hand.

“Since your birthday, have you…?”

I respond by shaking my head and he blows out a relieved breath. Then he asks, “Should I be worried? Is there anything there that might corrupt what we have before I have the chance to fix it?”

“No.” The word comes instantly because it’s the truth. “I love him, but in a totally different way. He’s a good friend, but that’s all he’ll ever be. He could never replace you on the pedestal I’ve put you on, it’s far too high.”

At that he smiles but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes, then he blows out a breath that projects his grief. “I have no right to be mad because we were not together, and truth be told I have wondered about that night since he kissed you in front of me, but I will be honest and say my heart is beating heavily in my chest and suddenly I have lost my appetite.”

“I’m sorry.”

He looks down and locks his hands behind his neck. “The thought of you with another man… especially a man who is an excellent competitor for your affections… It makes me feel *feral.*”

“Oh.”

“Like I want to drag you back to my car, take you on the back seat and mark your neck with my mouth for all to see.”

I gasp. “Oh.”

“Promise me there is nothing between you anymore. Swear it.”

I look him in the eyes, cupping his face with both of my hands. “I swear to you that I am fully committed to figuring out where this goes.”

“Good,” he whispers, pressing his forehead to mine. “Because my divorce was final as of yesterday morning, and tonight, I’d like to kiss you as a single man.”

“Is that why you haven’t kissed me yet?”

“When you accept my touch again, it’ll be the touch of a man who is six million percent committed to you with ties to nobody else.”

God… *he’s so sweet.*

I pull out the notebook, breaking the moment as I scribble in it.

He’s patient and not pushy in the slightest.

“I love you,” I say to him, something I never stopped saying to him. Kissing his jaw, I lock my arms around his neck and then hug him tight. He returns it, sighing into my neck as our bodies come together, temple to toes. “Can you kiss me now?”

“No.” He leans back, his smirk in place. “I’ll kiss you tonight, after our date.”

“Can’t I kiss you then too?”

He chuckles, a great sound. I scribble that down too. How much I love his laugh. “Come on. Let’s go inside.”

“Hey, lovebirds!” Robert yells from the entrance. “I want some tater tots.”

I giggle and turn away from the man I love to the man I used to wish I loved to get over the man I love… so complicated.

Ezra tenses again but soon relaxes when we sit inside the noisy restaurant and start tossing tater tots at each other like children.

Rob doesn’t say a word about the party but I’m glad it’s out in the open anyway and I’m glad my friend now approves of our love. Maybe others will follow suit, though I know I have a lot of work to do with Izabella.

I think Mario will be more forgiving.

It’s when we leave that I bring this up to him on our way home.

“I think it’s time I saw your mom again,” I say, taking his hand over the console. “Especially if we’re getting serious.”

He smiles so blindingly I feel it warm the space around us. Then he brings my hand to his lips and kisses. “I can make the arrangements.”

Truth be told I’m terrified, but if this is heading where I hope it is between us, then I don’t want to waste any more time. I need to get her back on my side before we announce a relationship.

“What do you want to do?” he asks, normally we go for drinks near my apartment or even hit up a karaoke bar so he can watch me mess up the words while drunk. My photographic memory doesn’t extend that far. Other times we walk and explore the market and little trinket stores, or we see a movie.

We do so many things in the short times he visits.

But this time I want to do something entirely different.

"I want to show you my apartment," I admit, peeking at him through the corner of my eye. "You've yet to see the inside."

"And we both know why that is."

I lick my lips and ponder my next words; I want to entice him without being too obvious. "Please?"

"How can I resist when you asked me so nicely?"

"You can't."

He laughs and turns down a side street, only to spin the car around and go the other way. "Let's go then."

He looks around my apartment with keen interest, only stopping when he gets to the vase on the table. I see his eyes soften with sadness when he sees that we're still only halfway there. Beyond asking me if I'm still adding to it, he hasn't asked its progress. For that I'm grateful. It's a fun, sweet thing that doesn't need to be put under pressure.

I wrap my arms around him from behind and kiss his shoulder blade. "We don't have to fill the vase. If these last four months have told me anything, it's that I love you and I trust you, I don't need a vase of paper to confirm that." His hands cover mine. "I used to worry every time you went back but now… now I don't worry at all. I know you're mine. I know you love me and I know it's only me and you."

He turns in my arms and cups my neck with one hand, using his thumb under my jaw to tilt my head back. "Do you still ache when you think of what I did?"

I hesitate. "That's not fair. My memory is excellent, I'm always going to feel pain when I think of it but that's just part of what we are."

"The jar needs to be full," he whispers, rubbing his nose against the bridge of mine. "It *needs* to be full."

"I disagree."

"You're stubborn."

"And I want you back," I admit, holding him tight to me. "I miss being your magazine girl. I miss waking up next to you ever day…"

"Will you move back to LA?"

My breath catches in my throat. I hadn't considered that. "I… that's… my job and my friends."

"You're not ready," he murmurs sadly and kisses the tip of my nose. "I can't move here. I can't leave Maria."

He's right. Especially now that he has joint custody. She can't come with him every other week and he can't go back there every other week. He has to stay where his job and daughter are.

I hadn't even considered any of that.

Tears fill my eyes as I realize what I'll have to give up to go back with him.

"Hey," he urges, giving me a gentle shake. "Don't give up on me now."

"I'm not. I'm just… I'm really happy here."

"Pick a note from the vase," he insists, turning me away from him so he can guide me to it. "Pick a note and read it. Then pick another."

I do as I'm told and dip my hand into the jar of folded papers.

He's set in my soul.

I fold it back up and put it back before picking out another.

He's always there for me when I need him.

"Just focus on that," he begs on a whisper. "Focus on how I make you feel and worry about the rest when it comes to it."

"Okay," I utter as his lips touch my neck.

"The vase needs to be full."

"Does it need to be full for you to stay with me?" I ask, softly. "Does it need to be full in order for you to take me to my bed and touch me?"

He groans, his eyes squeeze shut and his hold on me tightens.

"I miss the feel of you inside of me."

He nuzzles my neck, making me whimper, and backs me into the table where the delicate vase rests.

"You've tortured me for four months with your ability to resist even touching me… can we change that now? Can we let loose a little? We're halfway there, right? We should celebrate."

"I want to laugh at how eagerly you're trying to convince me but I'm so hard I can't remember how to laugh. All I want to do right now is kiss you."

I jump up, touching my lips to his for a fraction of a second and he jolts as though he has been struck by lightning.

I feel the same.

We come together after a moment of just looking at each other with such heat and intensity, and the taste of his tongue and lips after such a long time drives me to insanity.

I cling to him, claw at him, grip him as I kiss him, devouring him until my lips feel sore but then I just press harder.

There's a fire between us that flows through us both, burning for each other as we tear at clothes until there's nothing separating us but our will. Mine is fighting for the winning team, he holds back until I hop up on the table and part my thighs. When he eases into me, all

bets are off and he fucks me as hard as he did in his office that first time.

We both moan, groan, hiss, grasp, sigh…

It's incredible as always. I can't breathe for the pleasure I feel. It's too much. Every part of my body is searing with heat as his thick cock takes me so ruthlessly.

He moans my name, picking up his strength and temp. I moan his, saying it louder than I ever have so he knows he's the only man on my mind and he copies, letting me know I'm the only woman on his.

I orgasm first, peaking higher and higher, clawing at his back as I urge him on, wanting him to fuck me faster. "YES!" I scream as it consumes me, making me feel delirious with tingles and pleasure.

He joins me, thrusting into me as deep as he can reach and holding on for dear life.

"I love you," he whispers against my temple before kissing along my hairline, my jaw, and down my throat, still rocking his hips gently. "It has been hell without you. You have no idea how much I've missed this."

"I'm inclined to agree," I reply, panting and laughing when he lifts me, locking my legs around his waist.

"Let's go to bed, so I can make love to you good and proper."

"You say the sweetest things."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Forty-Three

The sex is out of this world.

Izabella Conti approaches my table with a waiter guiding her. She looks sleek in a floral shirt and a white skirt that flows to her ankles. She's so poised and lithe. I know she danced as a child and I wonder if that has anything to do with it.

She sits and I instinctively move my drink away, I chose water today, just in case because I'm surprising Ezra straight after this and I'm wearing my favorite cream A-line dress that crisscrosses on my back.

To say I've dressed up for him is an understatement.

He pulls her chair out, the waiter I mean, and she thanks him when he guides it back in with her sitting on it.

"I ordered you a sparkling water with lime," I say, motioning to her drink. "My dress can't fair against an attack of coffee."

"A regrettable moment on my part. I can only apologize. I was angry and I reacted appallingly." She pushes her sunglasses up but they drop back down and I fight the urge to laugh, then she removes them completely. "I suppose it is too much to ask for a fresh start?"

I'm surprised she's asking at all. "Don't you hate me?"

"I have no time to hate people, nor energy. I was angry with you. You were my friend and you contributed to the failure of my son's marriage. But I have spoken to my son, and as he makes it sound, you love each other very much."

I nod eagerly. "I love him, even after what he—" I stop myself because I don't know what she knows about our history. "I just love him so entirely he's all I ever think about."

"Will you be moving back to LA to be with him?" she asks curiously, looking at me with a slight smile on her lips though it is still strained, this is more progress than I ever could have wished for.

"That remains to be seen," I sip my water and peruse the menu, she does the same, though I'm not exactly hungry and I doubt she is either. We opt for some light snacks, finger sandwiches and mini cakes.

"Why? If you love him so entirely?"

I sigh heavily and think of Seattle and my friends and life there. "Other than Ezra and Laurie, there's nothing for me here. In Seattle I have an amazing job, an incredible boss, friends who I adore, and I just… I prefer the city. It doesn't have as much as LA of course but it has so much culture and such an amazing atmosphere."

"I guess you don't have too many fond memories of LA, what with it being the place your parents abandoned you, and Ezra broke your heart, and I threw a drink at you, and your ex-boyfriend stalked you." She cringes as she speaks. "But it's *Los Angeles*. It's the greatest city in America. Just this morning I saw Emma Stone at a stoplight. This is the place of dreams."

"I know, it's a really incredible place."

"You're scared he'll break your heart again?" Realization dawns on her face and for a moment I find myself in the presence of Izabella, my prior friend. "I don't think he would… truth be told the way he talks about you, how he is after visiting you, how anxious he gets before visiting you… I've never known anybody to love anybody *that* much."

"He's amazing." I smile wistfully at the thought of him. "He really is, but the vase isn't full yet. I don't have to decide until then."

"The what?"

I laugh quietly. "Nothing, sorry. Just a little something between your son and me."

I take out the notebook and jot down:

He talks to his family about how much he loves and misses me.

"I really would like to start again," Izabella says, placing her hand over mine. "A fresh start for both of us. What do you say?"

"Shouldn't it be me who is asking for that?"

"Neither of us is innocent. What's done it done. Let it be so." Her beautiful eyes connect with mine and she smiles so perfectly. "Come, let's forget this stale lunch and remind you just how incredible LA can be."

I grin, wondering if I have my old friend back, and stand, ready to face a brilliant day.

Being back in the offices where I used to work after nearly six months is insane. It's surreal and it makes me feel nervous.

I stand in the elevator awkwardly shuffling from foot to foot. Meanwhile my heart is racing because I'm panicking thinking that I

might be walking in on Ezra ploughing a random woman on his desk. A ridiculous thought but a genuine one. I wonder if that's why Elizabeth often just strolled into his office without waiting for me to let him know.

He doesn't deserve my mistrust. I worked for him for a long time and not once did he ever look at another woman while at work and he coexisted with some gorgeous women. Well, nobody but me.

I approach the PA who is at my old desk, surprised to find a man sitting there. Not that men aren't excellent PAs, just that it's a female-dominant role so I just assumed.

He smiles at me, showing white teeth fit for a celebrity and a golden tan that I'm not sure is real but looks incredible.

"It's you," he says happily. "Does he know you're coming? He didn't mention anything."

I shake my head. "I thought I'd surprise him."

"Say no more, go on through."

"Wait," I tap my fingers on his desk. "How do you know who I am?"

"He only talks about you *all the time*, besides, who do you think books his flights and hotels for your visits?" He slides his card my way. "If you ever need any return, call me and I'll hook you up, though you probably know the system better than I do. I had huge boots to fill when I started four months ago but I haven't been fired yet so…"

Wow, he's chatty. I like him. "I'm sure you're amazing but if you need any help, you let me know. Though you look like you've got it handled."

"There's always something new to learn." He motions for me to go on ahead. "I'll hold his calls for a while."

I laugh quietly and reach for the door, then I yank down the handle and step inside. This office smells just like him. I inhale deeply as I close the door behind me and meet his surprised eyes.

A smile slowly stretches his face and his gray eyes glitter with happiness.

He doesn't hesitate, he stands and strides towards me before lifting me and spinning me like he hasn't seen me in months, not a few days. "Cuore mio. What are you doing here?"

"I came to spend the day bonding once again with your mother. And also, to surprise you."

We kiss and he backs me into the door, groaning as he tastes me. "How did it go, was she nice?"

"She was lovely. We had a lot of fun."

He looks around, checking that the blinds are closed and then locks the door. "Good." His lips slant over mine and I hum when he

grips my hips and thrusts against me.

So tingly and nice. It reminds me of before, when we used to work together and play together. Back when what we were doing was wrong.

Now it's right, now it's okay.

Now it's all about me and him.

We dance a dance we know so well, fucking silently against the locked door in his office. He's so good with his cock, he always knows how to thrust, where to thrust, when to thrust. And when we climax it's not always together but it's always so intense. It usually leaves us both shaking.

After we clean up, he kisses me and pulls me onto his lap. "I'm glad you're here."

"Because of the orgasm?"

He chuckles and kisses the skin of my neck. "Well, there is that. But… I'm taking Maria to see the new Troll movie tonight. You should join us."

I bite my lip. "Elizabeth won't like that."

"I know but she has to start getting used to it eventually."

"Maybe you should speak to her first?"

"Why? She didn't speak to me when she introduced her new flame to our daughter last month."

My lips part. "She's dating somebody?"

"Yes."

I assess him, gauging his reaction. "How do you feel about that?"

"Truthfully? I was… *perturbed* at first. You don't spend thirteen years with somebody and not feel jealousy when they start to move on. But I'm okay with it now, he's a good man, we've done business together in the past and I hope they make each other very happy."

I run my fingers over his scalp, through his satin-soft hair, and consider what he said. It upsets me that he got jealous but my heart soars that he chose to be honest with me instead of sparing my feelings and placing another lie between us, albeit a small one. I feel even more secure in my relationship with him now. "If you think it won't upset Maria, then I'll come. I don't want to intrude on her time with her father."

"Technically it's her time with her mother but Elizabeth has a prior engagement, hence the fact I'm having her."

"You're co-parenting great, it seems."

He smiles. "And may it always be that way. So… will you join us?"

"Of course." I press my lips to his. "And may I stay with you tonight? I haven't booked a hotel."

"Stay forever."

"If only it were that simple."

“ROSE!” Maria yells and dives at me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

I kiss the top of her hair, wondering how she got so tall all of a sudden. “It has been so long I worried you might not remember me.”

“How can I forget you? Did you know I’m almost eleven now? I’m practically an adult.”

I laugh and thread my fingers through her dark hair. “You really are. You’re gorgeous.”

“Dad said that you were coming, he also said that he loves you.”

I blink, surprised that he told her that already. I imagined he would ease her into it but I suppose she’s older and very smart, she’d have seen straight through us.

“That I did.” Ezra throws his arm around my shoulder and kisses my temple. “I told you it’d be fine.”

“Are you okay with that, Maria?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Sure. Why not? You make him happy, right? And you were always nice to me.”

“You are wiser than your years, kid,” I say, hugging her again. “I missed you. My little soccer champ.”

Ezra leads us inside and off the busy street. “I don’t play soccer anymore. I go horse riding now.”

“Oh wow,” I breathe, awed. “I love horses!”

“Yes!” she cheers. “Then maybe I can convince *you* to buy one.”

I laugh nervously. “I don’t like them *that* much. But I’ll definitely come riding with you one day.”

“Seriously?”

“As serious as your dad’s disgusting tie today, did you see it?”

“Hey,” Ezra grumbles but his lips are twitching. “That was unnecessary.”

Maria cringes, “That blue, yellow, and white one? So gross.”

“Standing right here.”

“We know,” Maria and I chorus and join the line.

“Why don’t I wait here so we don’t lose our place and you two go choose snacks?” I suggest, looking at the mile-long lines at all of the kiosks.

Ezra kisses my jaw and takes his daughter away. I watch them go and pull out my notebook.

His daughter is amazing and so gorgeous.

“Do you want candy?” she asks, returning to me while my head is down.

I nod. “Of course I want candy.”

She takes off again, back to her father who winks at me.

I hope everything stays this amazing. I really do.

When the movie ends, we take Maria back to her mother, something Ezra relinquished to his wife per the divorce settlement agreement. I sit in the car and watch him walk her to the door which is lit from within. Such a gorgeous home.

The door opens and Maria hugs her dad goodbye, then hugs her mom hello. Then Elizabeth looks at the car and though there is a good twenty feet between us I see her body become stiff as a board.

I knew this wasn’t a good idea. I told him to take me to Laurie’s first, but he said that it’s time.

Whatever that means.

I don’t know what she says to Ezra but she’s angry and he physically stops her from charging my way. They argue for a while and then she shouts the word “WHORE!” at me and slams the door in his face.

He strides back, looking apologetic. “Sorry about that.”

“I told you to take me to Laurie’s.”

“She needed to see you.”

“Does she even know we’re seeing each other again?”

He nods in the dark and places his hand on the back of my seat while reversing out of the driveway. “Of course she does, I told her that I wanted to try and get you back.”

“And now she knows you have.”

“Have I?” he asks cautiously. “How’s that jar?”

When I don’t reply, his smile loses its light. “We’ll get there.”

“I know.”

I consider filling it with random scraps of paper but that would be cheating.

Instead I write down another, ready to add to the jar when I return home.

He’s patient, more so than me.

Though I did sort of cheat at one point. I added numerous notes, such as:

I love his penis.

I love how thick his penis is.

I love how good he is at using his penis.

His penis is beautiful.

Then I stopped that because I wanted the jar to be more authentic and not just penis related. He’d given me twelve orgasms that

weekend though. *TWELVE.*

"You don't think she'll try and turn Maria against me, do you?"

"I think Maria is far too smart to be poisoned by such bitterness. She loves you in her own way and always will."

I breathe a sigh of relief and write down another note:

He always says the right things.

"Let's go see Laurie," I order, throwing away my tension and bouncing excitedly in my seat. "I really hope she's home."

"You didn't call first?"

"No. I want her tics to go mental."

"Can I record her?"

"Not if you want to leave with your nose all perfect like it is."

He chuckles at that and I yawn loudly. "Tired?"

"It has been a really busy day. Your mom dragged me around the city, trying to remind me why I should live here again."

His face is carefully blank. "Did she manage it?"

I shrug a little. "I really love Seattle."

"But… it's Los Angeles."

"Why does everybody say it like that?"

"Because it is."

He grins but then it vanishes.

Of course I notice and reach over to stroke his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I have no right to ask," he admits, pressing his lips together. "None at all."

"Ask anyway." I want to know what's eating at him.

He inhales as though preparing himself and then exhales slowly. "Truth be told I'm terrified of the answer. Worried that maybe I'm asking too soon."

"Just ask," I say, grinning now because he's just so cute sometimes.

With his hand on my thigh, he finally finds the courage. "Is there another reason why you want to stay behind? Another man perhaps?"

I place my hand over his, and reassure him, "I'm not seeing anybody else."

He clears his throat, shifting in his seat while still driving carefully. "You and Robert…? You have chemistry, I've always seen it and I know that you were both intimate, I saw you kiss and verbally you hinted at more… though we've never discussed it since."

I click my tongue against my palate six times and then scrape my teeth over my lower lip. I don't know what to say and my hesitation hasn't made him feel at ease.

"We did more than kiss, but not quite what you're— It doesn't

matter what we did. I won't go into details…"

He tenses, keeping his eyes on the road. My heart is hammering in my chest. I don't want to tell him this, he doesn't need to know, but he asked and I'm not going to lie. "Do you… *feel* for him? Perhaps on a similar level to how you feel for me?"

"As amazing as Robert is, I just don't like him that way. Mainly because I'm so enamored with you."

His grip loosens. "I shouldn't have asked but I'm glad that I did." We smile at each other though his doesn't quite meet his eyes. "I feel awful for Robert, but I can't lie and say I'm not ecstatic that your affections for me are still strong despite the fact you have *done things* with him." He grits out that last part and I know he's struggling with his temper. He wants to get angry, but he has no right to get angry and we both know it.

"You broke me," I remind him, feeling a surge of the same anger as the memory of what he did to me and the pain that I felt…

I felt…

I felt…

I felt…

I—NO. I'm not doing that.

I speak honestly to stop that morning playing out in my mind again. "I'm terrified if I come back to you, like I did before, you'll break me again."

"If I could move to Seattle to be with you, I would in a heartbeat. I don't like that I'm asking you to put this amount of trust in me. I haven't earned it. I don't deserve it."

This is just such a difficult situation. As much as I want to keep blaming him for everything that happened, it's not healthy. I need to let it go, even if I decide to stay in Seattle, it must be for the right reasons and not because I'm terrified to go back.

I tap my foot, counting the gentle thuds in sixes.

"If it's about your job, I'll take care of you. Or get Robert to find you a new one. You know he's good at that. If it's about your friends, you can commute back and forth as often as you like. If—"

"I love my job, I love my apartment, I love my friends, I love my life. Okay? But I also love you, and Laurie, and now Izabella and I are on better terms and I can see Maria again; there are a lot of reasons to come back, but it's not that simple. Mr. Watanabe is a really great boss… no offence—"

"Offence taken," he jests.

"—I love working for him and the firm is full of amazing people."

"But?"

"No buts. I'm just conflicted."

We both fall silent, my indecision over my future driving an

invisible wedge between us both.

"Remember why you love me, and ask yourself if I'm worth it," he whispers, breaking my heart with how sullen he sounds.

In a book this would be so easy, I'd move and be happy and never regret my decision. But this is my life and there are so many things to consider. This isn't an easy decision, but any step worth taking is a tough one to climb.

"Maybe when you place a final note in the vase, you'll know."

I smile at him. "I know that I love you."

"And for now, that is enough."

As expected, Laurie is so shocked and excited to see me her first reaction is to slap me around the face. I don't know why I'm the only one she does that to. Then she pulls my hair, all the while screaming and trying to hug me.

We bounce like we haven't seen each other in months, not weeks, and Ezra steps around us to shake Kyle's hand.

"I missed youuuuuuu," Laurie growls in my ear.

"I missed you mooooooorrrre," I growl back, and we walk into her house still attached, with two very amused males guiding us to the sofa.

"Somebody make me a cocktail," Laurie demands and we part, only to crash on the couch and hug again.

When we part for real, Kyle is mixing our drinks and Ezra is chopping limes into quarters.

"So," Laurie says around a grin, "tell me everything I've missed."

"Ezra is really sexy when he's jealous."

She lowers her voice an octave, dips her head, and raises a brow while speaking through the side of her mouth. "He's really sexy when he's anything."

With that we both turn to look at him and sigh dreamily when he throws his head back and laughs at something Kyle said. Though Kyle is very attractive too, he doesn't hold a candle to my Ezra.

"I'm so open to a bit of *swinging*, if you catch my drift."

I narrow my eyes on her. "I will cut you."

"Just putting it out there."

"Slut."

"You stole him first, you massive whore."

I pull her hair.

"Ow. What the fuck?"

She pulls mine back, it burns my scalp.

Then we pull each other's, yelling and laughing as we both scrap

for dominance.

"Oh my God… get naked!" Kyle begs.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Forty-Four

He sings karaoke with me.

"Under the sea!" I sing comically, and the door slams shut behind me making me and Ezra howl with laughter.

I was mimicking my best friend who drank so many cocktails last night that she face-planted the floor outside of the bathroom and decided to swim across the polished wooden floor. Yep… legs kicking, arms flailing, belly bouncing… all the while singing, *Under the Sea*, from *The Little Mermaid*.

I laughed so hard I couldn't breathe, and Ezra laughed so hard he fell off his seat.

Neither of us ended up going home and instead spent the night on Laurie's sofa, curled together so sweetly. I've never been more comfortable being so uncomfortable.

We woke, I made breakfast, and then we left the two hungover lovebirds to start the day. I started mine with another note.

He holds me all night.

And another:

He loves my friends.

And a final:

He's happy to sleep wherever I am.

"Done," I mutter, stuffing it back in my bag, then I take the hand he holds out to me. "Let's go enjoy the day."

I squeal when he picks me up by my hips, lifting me high above his head.

"What are you doing?"

He drops me, kisses me, and drags me to his car. "Taking you

home so we can shower, fuck, and I can convince you to stay another night."

"I can't, I have to work." I pout. "The only reason I got to be here today is because Mr. Watanabe needs me on Saturday."

He groans and presses me up against the side of the warm vehicle. "I won't see you for another ten days."

"It'll fly by."

"You're right, it will fly by, time is flying by and that jar is getting fuller and fuller every day. I'm scared I was wrong, that when you reach the end, you'll decide to leave me anyway."

"Have hope. I'm sure everything will fall into place."

He releases me and we head home silently.

We shower.

We fuck.

We shower again and then we fuck again and, finally, he takes me to the airport.

We stand by the gate with tears in our eyes and heavy hearts in our chests.

After we hug and kiss, I board my flight, clicking my fingers as I go, and cry some more because what if he's right? What if these are our last few weeks together?

Because he's right, we can't keep doing the long-distance thing, not if we want to be serious. That's not the kind of relationship I want.

I enter my apartment, ripping the notes from the notepad and folding them, there are so many this time but then there always are.

I drop each one into the vase, giving it a gentle shake so every available space is full, and when I'm done, tears fill my eyes because there's only space for one more. Two at most, but the jar is pretty full up.

The tears fall as I grip the table and look at it, still undecided. I know I forgive him. I know our past doesn't hurt me anymore, well, not as much. But can I leave everything I've built these past six months to return to him?

I don't like change, I never have.

I rock the chair back and forth, listening to the wooden legs hit the floor. Twelve times. Twenty-four times. I don't stop until my phone snaps me out of it when it vibrates, I've already sent Ezra a text to let him know I'm safe home.

Ezra: Just ten more days. I'll be counting.

Rose: The jar is full, Ezra. It has room for one more note on the top.

Ezra: Whatever you decide I will always love you and I will never stop hoping that you'll return to me one day. You have ruined me for all other women. I love you, Rose Sinclair.

I don't reply. I need time to think. But then… I think of this pain in my chest that I feel every time he leaves and every time I leave him.

I hate this. I wish I never left LA to begin with. Then I notice that my fingers aren't clicking and I'm not pacing and I'm not thinking in sixes because I'm so entirely consumed by him. Because loving him rids me of my usually crippling anxieties.

Figuring that, the answer becomes so clear to me as I write my final note:

Loving him makes me feel safe.
And I've never felt safe before him.

It sits on the top of the pile, slightly higher than the rim of the vase. I smile at it.

He was right. Filling it would tell me exactly what to do.

There's only one thing to do.

I write out my sad resignation to Mr. Watanabe and we have a teary goodbye.

My home isn't in Seattle or Los Angeles. My home is Ezra Conti.

Ten days later, when he knocks on my apartment door, I greet him with a smile and an empty suitcase in hand.

He eyes it curiously. "You're showing me this because?"

"You're going to help me pack."

Gray eyes flare with hope, like light peeking through stormy clouds. "Pack?"

I nod, smiling tearfully. "I'm coming home."

A choked noise escapes him as he scoops me up, burying his face in my neck. I drop the suitcase and return his embrace. He really does give the best hugs.

Then he kisses me, my lips, my cheeks, my nose, my brows, making me giggle, and I walk him back towards my bedroom where I make love to his body in Seattle for the last time.

OceanofPDF.com

Epilogue

He never gave up on me. I hope he never will.

It's Christmas Day at the Contis', and this year, though we unfortunately don't have Maria because she's with her mom, it is still a wonderful day with Erika, Steve, Izabella, and Mario. All of whom accepted me back into their fold with little to no effort. It's as it was before, if not better now because it's my hair Ezra is playing with as he sits beside me around a Monopoly board.

The room is perfectly decorated, festive, modern, creams and golds. So pretty.

We are currently in the process of opening gifts. Maria and I took the liberty of chopping up all her father's ugly ties and placing them into a box for his first gift but she's not here so he won't be getting that until tomorrow. I purchased him some nicer ties, one has my name on it in huge bold letters. Another has a huge golden rose in the middle with the stem leading to the point.

With Ezra it's hard buying him anything new because, anything he wants, he already has. So, I go for funny gifts, sexy gifts, trinket gifts. Nothing expensive but things I've seen that have reminded me of him.

He opens mine with laughter and love in his eyes and then hands me a huge box.

I tear through the wrapping paper and fall back laughing.

I reveal the MacBook to him and the group with an excited grin on my face. "You got me a MacBook?"

"You once told me that you might forgive me for a MacBook, so I got you a MacBook to set things in stone."

I laugh harder, I can't help it, it's not funny to them because they weren't there, but it's hilarious to me. And sweet because that was a long time ago and he never forgot. "You have way more money than sense."

"I'll have it if you don't want it," Erika jests, reaching for the box.

I grab it back and hug it. "Mine."

We finish unwrapping and eat a delicious dinner cooked by Mario and me. I hadn't learned until recently that he's an excellent chef and

I have learned so much.

Then comes the after-dinner ornament hanging, a yearly tradition where every family member present hangs an ornament on the tree with their name on it, and they make a wish for the coming year. It's so sweet. Last year I watched them, and it made me feel such loss because of the upbringing I never had.

This year I watch them and smile because one day maybe my kids will be hanging an ornament with theirs. It makes me feel all kinds of emotional.

They each go up, one by one, until there's nobody left but me and that's when Izabella hands me a white box. My breath catches. I open it and gently pinch the golden ring at the top of the dark red ornament. My name is scrawled across the side in beautiful flowing font.

I'm going to cry.

"You guys," I mutter, my tone disbelieving. "Is this really mine?"

"No, it's my new dog's, we named her Rose," Erika answers, grinning.

I laugh quietly and shakily take it to the tree, placing the empty box on the floor by my feet as I feel around the ring for the thread, I'll need to hang it from the branches.

"Damn, I need some twine or something," I say, looking at Izabella who then looks at Ezra.

Nobody says anything as he takes my precious ornament and fiddles with the top.

Giddy, and feeling part of a family for the first time in my life, I snatch it back from him, holding the string between my fingers and the ornament on my palm. I find a space and I'm about to hook it on when something round, gold, and shiny, with a gold rose in the center of a band full of tiny diamonds, catches my eyes. And my breath.

I can't breathe.

I freeze. Unable to move.

That wasn't there before.

I remove it from the thread, hook my ornament on the tree, wish that I'll have another year of happiness and good health for the family I've acquired, then I turn.

I look for him and my eyes drop down to where he's waiting on one knee. Charming smile on his face. Vulnerable gaze in his gray eyes. Love oozing from him in waves.

"Absolutely," I say, nodding my head like a crazy person.

"I haven't asked you yet," he jokes, taking my hand and the ring.

He slides it onto my finger as I try not to cry. It fits perfectly and it is so beautiful and unique to me. I love it.

"Ask her then," Erika urges, and when I look at her, she's blotting

tissue under her eyes. Izabella smacks her arm, she too is blotting tears away.

"So… I have a theory," he tells me, looking confident. "I've been married already—"

There's a collective groan from everyone but me. I press my lips together, so I don't laugh as he shoots them a look.

"But I figured, we've got that on our side. Because it's my second wedding, and two is a multiple of six—"

"So is three," I point out and he blanches adorably.

"Whatever… my point is, I love you, Rose Sinclair, soon to be Rose Conti, and I have never been so sure about anybody in my entire life. There's not a single moment that I wonder if this is the right thing because—"

"It's always felt right."

"Exactly," he whispers. "Marry me. Stay mine forever. I can't promise that I'll never upset you. But I can promise that I'll always try to *never* disappoint you."

Grinning, I admire the ring for a moment longer and throw my arms around his neck. He falls back a step. "Yes, six million percent yes." I lean back, tears in my eyes, then I kiss him, firmly but briefly because his family are watching. "Best Christmas ever."

"Agreed."

"I wish Maria had been here to see this."

"Over here!" comes her crackly voice from Steven's phone screen. He's holding it up so Maria could see.

I laugh and take it from him. "Merry Christmas, Maria."

"I'm so glad it's you, my best friend Janie's stepmom is a massive douche, but I still think you can be worked around about the horse thing."

Erika takes the phone before Ezra can admonish her for the use of the word douche. I'm just happy that everyone was here. Everyone but Laurie, but she has her own family now.

But then… Mario shows me his phone and I see Laurie's face, she's crying but the phone has been muted.

"She kept having her outbursts," he explains with a sheepish smile, "I had to mute her."

Laughing, I unmute it and they cover their ears as we scream together.

"LET ME SEE IT!" she demands and I hold it up to the camera. "Oh my God, that's divine. I think I prefer it to mine."

"Hey," Kyle whines, but he's used to her humor by now I just know it has rolled right off him.

"ROSE RINGS IN YOUR BUTTHOLE, MR. CUNTYFLAPS!"

"I sure hope not," both Ezra and Mario chorus making the rest of

us howl with laughter.

I say my goodbyes to my best friend and hold the arm that Ezra has banded around my middle. He rests his chin on my shoulder and kisses my temple.

“I adore you,” I whisper, closing my eyes as we share a private moment in this busy room.

“I adore you too.”

Then I’m ripped away, only to be hugged by Izabella who whispers, “Welcome to the family, Rose."

Then she swiftly pulls away, likely so we both don’t sob.

I have a family. For the first time in my entire life, I have a family.

“Who wants dessert?” Izabella asks, and the crowd roars.

My stomach grumbles as it always does at the mention of treats and I follow them into the kitchen where a selection of cakes and other snacks wait on platters on the counter.

I grab a bowl but really there’s only one thing I want right now.

Feeling comfortable in a home that isn’t mine and a little buzzed from the two glasses of wine I had with my dinner, I search through cupboards until I find what I’m looking for. A small tub of crunchy peanut butter.

I stuff a spoonful into a profiterole and layer it with chocolate and a piece of banana. Then I bite into it and moan. “God, that is so good. I just love peanut butter and bananas at the moment.”

Izabella drops the empty dish in her hands, it bounces on the floor but doesn’t crack. Mario stares at me. Erika lets out a happy squeal and Ezra chokes on the food in his mouth.

Steven pats him on the back but I’m too weirded out to be concerned about him dying right now.

“Why are you all looking at me like that?” Nobody answers. “Is there something on my face?”

“No,” Ezra, who is fine now, kisses my cheek and wipes away a droplet of chocolate from the corner of my lips. Then he shoots the others a look and they busy themselves with what they were doing before their weird halt. “Nothing.”

Izabella and Erika start whispering amongst themselves, occasionally glancing my way.

Meanwhile I scoop more peanut butter into a bowl and mush it with banana before eating it from a spoon. So good.

I’ve been doing this a lot lately. It’s not something I have typically enjoyed before but now it’s the best thing in the world.

When I reach for my remaining wine in the other room, Izabella swoops in and takes it from me. “That wine is probably stale now. You don’t want stale wine.”

“I only poured it like twenty minutes ago.”

“I agree,” Erika puts in, smiling like a crazy woman. “It’s probably stale.”

“What are you, the wine police?” I eat more banana and peanut butter and then point at them with my spoon. “Why do you keep looking at each other like that?”

“Like what?” Izabella asks but ducks out of the room without waiting for my answer.

“Why are they acting so weird?” I whisper at Ezra who is looking at his sister with a similar excited expression.

“I’m going to the store,” Erika announces, standing suddenly.

“It’s Christmas, good luck finding a place.” Steven says this but jumps to his feet when she widens her eyes at him. “Guess I’m coming with you.”

“Maybe *they’ve* had stale wine,” I mutter, watching them go, whispering to themselves along the way.

Meanwhile Mario just beams at me, smiling broader than is normal.

I decide to just roll with it, looking at my new ring while eating my peanut butter and sipping a lemon tea that Izabella just made for me. It goes down nicer than the wine.

We chat, getting back to normal for a while when Erika finally returns after being gone nearly an hour.

She’s empty-handed so now I’m super confused as to why she needed to find a store. Maybe she didn’t find one.

“We should talk,” Ezra whispers, removing my peanut butter treat from my hands.

I follow him into the hall and accept his soothing kiss. “Changed your mind already?”

“Not a chance.”

“What’s wrong? You look on edge.”

He chuckles nervously and rubs my arms with his hands. “When was your last period?”

What? Now I’m really confused. “I don’t get periods, you know this. The depo shot stops them.”

“Okay,” he mutters and nods for a while, just bobbing his head like a doggy on a dashboard. “When was your last depo shot?”

“Well… it would have been three mo—” I slap a hand to my mouth. “Oh my God… I FORGOT! I never forget.” He peels my hand away from my lips. “It would have been before I left for Seattle. I didn’t even think about it.” My hand goes to my stomach. “Could I be pregnant? But I was told it can take years to conceive after getting the shot.”

He steers me towards the bathroom. “Want to find out?”

“How?”

“Erika got a pregnancy test.”

I blink rapidly, still walking towards the bathroom. “How did she…? What the hell is going on? Is this some kind of cruel prank?”

He turns me back to face him. “Okay, definitely not a prank. Definitely the best day of my life about to become even better if you’re carrying my baby. The reason everybody has been acting so weird is because in my family, every woman who has conceived a child and either been a Conti or married to a Conti, always craves peanut butter. *Always.*”

“Seriously?”

He nods, eyes twinkling with humor. “Elizabeth did. Erika did with her two unfortunate pregnancies.” Both ended in miscarriage before Ezra and I got together. So sad. We don’t talk about it. “My mom did. My nonna did. My bisnonna did. It didn’t exist before her but every single aunt I’ve ever had all claimed to crave peanut butter.”

“Dude, that’s like really weird. I’m creeped out.”

He chuckles knowingly. “Yep.”

“So… there’s a test in there waiting for me?”

“There is.”

“And if I am?”

“Then you are.”

“And if I’m not?”

“Then one day we try.”

“This is too much for one day,” I whimper, opening the bathroom door and staring at the three boxes on the vanity.

He unwraps them and takes out the sticks. Then, without shame, one by one I pee on them under a staggered stream, making him turn around first.

I wipe them down, clip the lids back on and wash my hands.

He guides me out of the bathroom, telling me to let them cook a little first.

I’m anxious, I start clicking, something I rarely do these days. He kisses my temple and we all just sit in silence as though waiting for somebody to die, not for somebody to be actualized.

“I can’t take it anymore,” Izabella cries, looking at her watch for the thousandth time.

“You go,” I say, still clicking. Ezra holds my hands in his and kisses me on the lips. “I daren’t look.”

Erika and Izabella shove each other out of the way in a race to find out my results. I laugh, loving how excited they are, and then inhale sharply when they fall silent suddenly.

Ezra and I share a look. He kisses me again, as tense as I am.

Izabella starts sobbing. Erika starts screaming.

“That can only mean one thing,” Steven mumbles, smiling at us,

not a hint of envy in his eyes. He stands and so do we. “Congratulations, guys.” He hugs us both and Mario follows. Then the women. Then finally, my fiancé who picks me up, spins me around, and kisses my face over and over again, in sixes.

“Still think this is the best Christmas ever?” he asks. I nod into his neck and cry because it really is.

“I’m going to have somebody,” I whisper. “I’m going to finally have a blood relative.”

“Oh my God,” Izabella starts sobbing again and wraps her arms around both of us. “You just broke my heart.”

Mine has never felt so whole.

Bella Erika Conti, the most beautiful little baby girl, was born six months later, purple and screaming her lungs to the high heavens. Erika helped guide her into the world, Ezra cut her umbilical cord, and I got to hold her first.

My husband and I married six months after. We honeymooned six weeks later for two weeks, and we will live together, happily ever after.

The sixes will always be there as a comfort to me but so will Ezra Conti. So will Bella. So will everybody that I love. My people comforts. My anxiety busters as Laurie calls herself.

It wasn’t right how I achieved this happiness, but it ended right, for everyone, and for that I’ll always be grateful.

THANK YOU FOR READING BECOMING HIS MISTRESS
Please continue for an after-credit Conti wedding special and also a clip from my latest release, NAKED OR DEAD.

OceanofPDF.com

Snapback to the wedding…

"If you could all look my way," Laurie calls into the microphone, swaying drunkenly, tapping a plastic fork against a plastic glass because the servers are *not* about to give her another crystal one when she has thrown five. The tapping makes no noise, she's too drunk to care.

"What is she doing?" Halley asks.

"No idea," I whisper back, smiling at my best friend who looks stunning.

"I did a thing," she announces, grinning mischievously.

"Uh-oh." My smile slowly fades, and my eyes become wider. When Laurie does a thing, it's not usually a thing anybody else would do.

"Why *uh-oh*?" Halley shifts forward.

"If you could all look underneath your fancy-ass name cards, you'll see a folded piece of paper. DON'T OPEN IT!" She shrieks the last part and we all cringe. I don't have a name card.

"What is she doing?" Ezra asks me.

"How the hell am I supposed to know? *It's Laurie*."

"Fair point." He holds my hand for dear life.

"Right, well, so my best friend, the gal getting married today."

"Already got married," I correct and the crowd laughs.

"Whatevz," she murmurs and then continues at a normal drunken tone, "she kept a jar full of all the reasons she loves Mr. Ezra Conti—"

"Oh dear God no," I breathe, leaning forward and placing my hands flat on the table.

"Mr. Ezra Conti's idea, as a plea to get our girl here back." She yanks on her own hair and almost falls off the stage. "So I thought, why not share their love with you?"

"Oh God," I choke, unable to form a coherent thought.

"Everybody very carefully open up the paper and make sure to return them to me by the end of the night because I need to put them back in the vase."

Oh my God…

Finally, I get a hold of myself and my shock and stand then shout, "NOBODY OP—"

It's too late. The nosy bastards would have opened them even if I said no.

Everybody opens theirs and though there are some collective awwws, some people comment on how sweet theirs are, Izabella screeches and throws hers away from her like it's on fire.

I sit back down and let my forehead hit the table six times. Ezra does the exact same beside me.

"I'm going to kill her," I groan.

Halley finds this all hilarious and laughs so hard she has to reapply her makeup afterwards.

"So much love," Laurie cries as Kyle guides her from the stage.

Mario drops his in front of his son. Ezra reads it and I look at it over his shoulder.

He gives AMAZING head. Like so good. Mind blowing.

He grins at me, smug and satisfied. I let my head hit the table again.

Yep. Going to kill her.

OceanofPDF.com

Have you read…?

NAKED OR DEAD

I swing my keys around my finger, making it look like I'm headed to my own car, and hasten my steps when they all climb into a large four-by-four truck with a covered bed. I memorize the license plate and brand as it peels out of the lot, and then, smiling to myself, I climb into my own car and type it into my phone.

Got him.

They return forty minutes later, and I follow them inside, not because I have to, but just because I want to appreciate his rear for just a bit longer. It's a nice, firm, round, athletic rear. It's just a shame it's attached to such a douchebag.

I do love though how he automatically has an issue with me. Like he just knows I'm about to make his life hell. He's obviously very perceptive.

But so am I.

He obviously has good instincts.

But so do I.

I notice him glance over his shoulder at me as we both stroll down the hall in the same direction. I notice his lips purse and his eyes narrow. I notice him whisper to the guy on his right.

They keep going, but so do I. I quicken my pace to get even closer, shouldering past coeds and even teachers. I get so close at one point I'm a nose breadth away from his back. I could kiss his spine if I wanted to; that dip that rests perfectly center to both sides of his body.

God, he smells good.

Then I drop back, just in time for him to check again without seeing how close I was. Though he felt me for the most part, I was too quick for him to catch.

He glances behind him again and I smirk at him.

He takes the bait, stops, and turns so suddenly it takes his friends another two steps to realize he's no longer walking with them.

"What the fuck do you want, maggot?"

The people around us still like before, a few laugh, the boys with him share excited glances.

“Your attention,” I state boldly, still smirking.

He scoffs and looks around him with a fake smile on his face. He’s assessing his peers. Checking they’re listening to him for when he roasts me.

I beat him to the punch and hold up the black leather square, full of bank cards and cash and likely his ID. His smile fades and his eyes go to the wallet. It really is quite full of some serious dollar. I should have snuck a few out of it.

“You dropped your wallet.” I hold his gaze and his dark eyes lose the hardness they had.

He tries to snatch it from my hand while sneering at me. “Don’t touch anything that belongs to me, belegana.” I move my hand away, keeping it out of reach.

“Okay, so I should have just let somebody else pick it up and steal your cash? I’ll do that the next time your irresponsible ass can’t keep track of your shit in my path.” I slap it against his chest so hard the sound echoes around the hall and his chest muscle twitches under the force. He grits his teeth. “You’re welcome.”

He catches it before it falls past his waistline and watches me saunter away, flipping him off over my shoulder as I go. I catch the eyes of Barbie and her squad; she surprisingly gives me a sympathetic smile.

Sympathy over what?

I’ve got Nok exactly where I want him.

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgments

PamPammy Shepherd, you had such an influence on this book in the best kind of way. It felt okay before, but for me, now, it feels perfect and that's because of you not being afraid to tell me where I was going wrong. Rose thanks you for taking care of her character and making sure I did her justice. You're an amazing friend, person, everything.

Jami Kehr, you give so much and ask for nothing. I am always awed by you.

Everyone who read and reviewed NAKED OR DEAD, I am so grateful to you. Your reviews and recommendations are what help my books get noticed in those first few days and forever after. Small-time authors like myself rely so much on the kindness of readers to help us spread the name of our babies so that people might read them. I am forever humbled by your kindness and willingness to help me do just that. I love and appreciate you all.

Jami Kehr, Charlotte Day, Pammy Shepherd, Savanna Miller, Victoria Full, Miz Biheiv (Monika), Megan Mees, Belen Francesconi, Diane Norwood, Frank Kothbauer, Heather Packer, Jackie Ashmead, Jaimie Stevenson-Cox, Lucy Coverdale, Synclare Moss, Tania Renteria, Shannon Garner. Tania Shrimpton, Elizabeth Butts, NaeNae (Jenn Hare), Scarlett Emily, Gail Stalley.

OceanofPDF.com

About the Author

A. E. Murphy is the queen of sarcasm and satire, she likes long walks in the park, as much as ice cubes like to chill in a roasting oven. She's effortlessly independent and so good at adulting it's unfair on the rest of the world. She only napped twice today and has only avoided the dishes for three days before making the child slaves do them this morning. Winning! Her favourite hobby is writing, her worst hobby is reading through that writing. Also, she has three cats that carry toys to the top of the stairs and drop them down so they can chase them. They do this repeatedly in the middle of the night. Who cares if she has work the next morning? Not the cats, that's for sure. And if it's not the cats doing the waking, it's the toddler crawling into bed with her and pulling individual hairs from her scalp with pudgy little fingers for comfort.

This is likely why she's in a constant state of grump unless there's chocolate and coffee. P.S. Please leave feedback, if not on the book then on this ridiculous bio she wrote herself. It's the least you can do seeing as she'll forever talk in the third person now. Alex loves her readers. Alex says thank you. Alex smiles.

Contact

Website
aemurphyauthor.com

Twitter
twitter.com/A_E_Murphy

Facebook
www.facebook.com/a.e.murphy.author

www.facebook.com/XelaKnight

Email
a.e.murphy@hotmail.com

OceanofPDF.com

Also By The Author

Standalone Novels

Masked Definitions

HIS FATHER

STEPDORK

NAKED OR DEAD

Becoming His Mistress

Seas of Seduction

Seizing Rain

Freeing Calder

The Little Bits Series

A Little Bit of Crazy

A Little Bit of Us

A Little Bit of Trouble

A Little Bit of Truth

A Little Bit of Guilt

The Distraction Trilogy

Distraction

Destruction

Distinction

The Broken Trilogy

Broken

Connected

Forever

A Broken Story

Disconnected (Dillan)

Sweet Demands Trilogy

Lockhart

Lockdown

Unlocked

OceanofPDF.com